

LINK 4b: The forces impacting upon schools and their public purposes (Short Version)

Bill Mulford, Neil Cranston, Jack Keating, and Alan Reid

Part of the literature review for the ARC Linkage Project

“Education investment in Australian schooling: Serving public purposes”

What are the public purposes of schooling? To date, there has not been any systematic study of how these are understood or enacted in Australian schools in the new environment, and the factors that facilitate and/or inhibit schools enacting such purposes. Given a climate of rapid change in educational policy and considerable investment of public funds in schools, the task of clarifying such purposes has become more urgent.

A team of researchers comprising four academics from universities in four different states is currently seeking to address this important gap. With a focus on primary schools, the team is working with key professional organisations including the Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) and the Education Foundation, an independent non-profit association in Victoria.

As part of the ongoing work of the research project, ‘Education Investment in Australian Schooling: Serving Public Purposes’, the researchers are undertaking a number of literature reviews on the philosophical, historical, current and future forces, and sociological aspects on the public purposes of education. Each of these literature reviews is to be summarised and made available as an article for AGPPA and its state affiliates. This summary focuses on the current and future forces impacting upon schools and their public purposes.

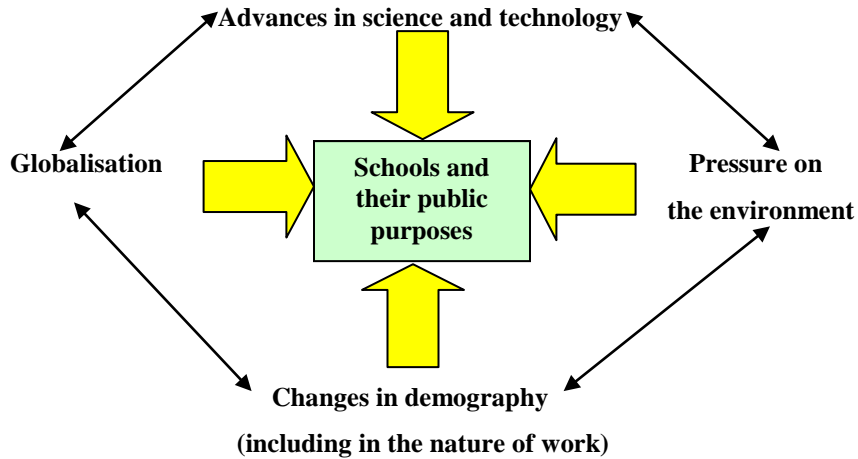
Introduction

Schools both reflect and shape the society in which they function. But in the latter part of the 21st century a number of forces are challenging the very nature of schooling. As many of these forces need a collective societal response they impact on the public purposes of schools. They are causing educational organizations and systems around the world to broaden and personalise curriculum and to rethink school structures.

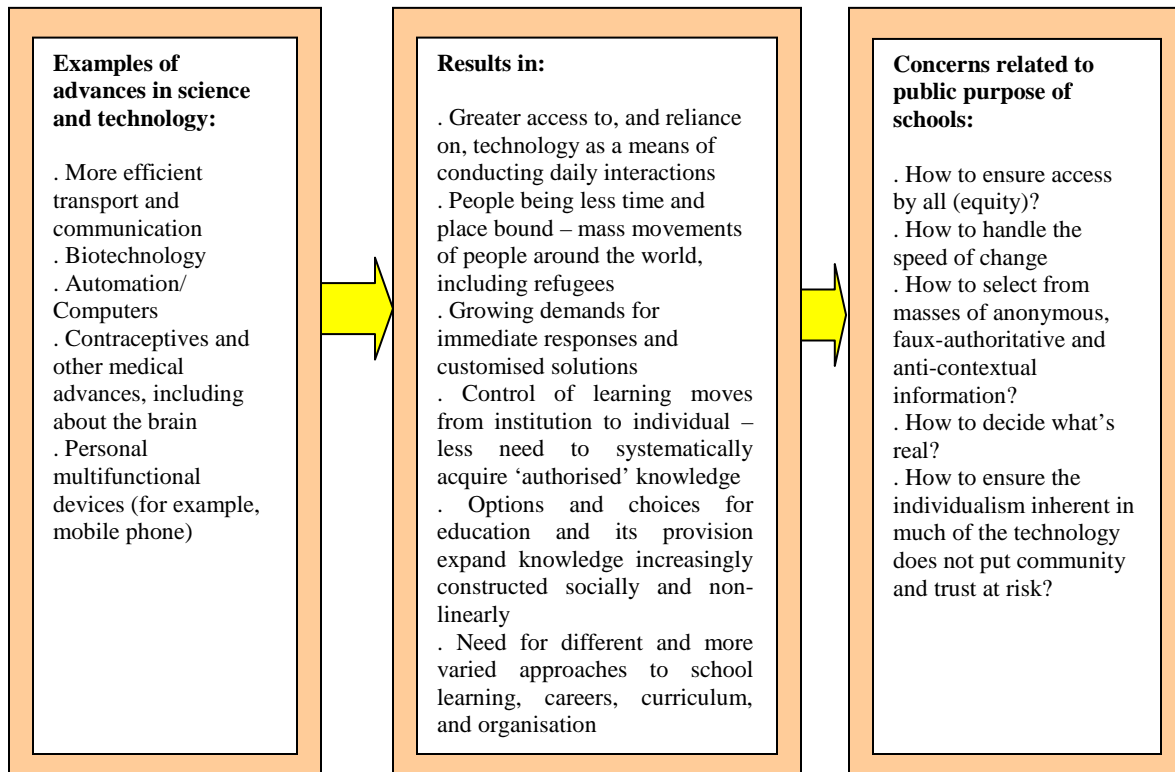
While none of us knows what the future holds, we can work to shape that future, to strive to ensure that, as far as possible, what happens is what we want to happen. School leaders need to occasionally climb onto the balcony and overlook the stage; to detach themselves, in order to gain a more distant view of issues that are close by. But care is needed. When lost on a highway, a road map is very useful; but when one is lost in the swamp of today’s world and the education that serves it, a world where the topography is constantly changing, a road map is of little help. A simple compass that indicates the general direction to be taken, and allows school leaders to use their own ingenuity in overcoming various difficulties is likely to be much more valuable. This paper aims to provide such a compass; to briefly examine its cardinal points, or forces, and the implications of each for schools and their public purposes.

The Forces

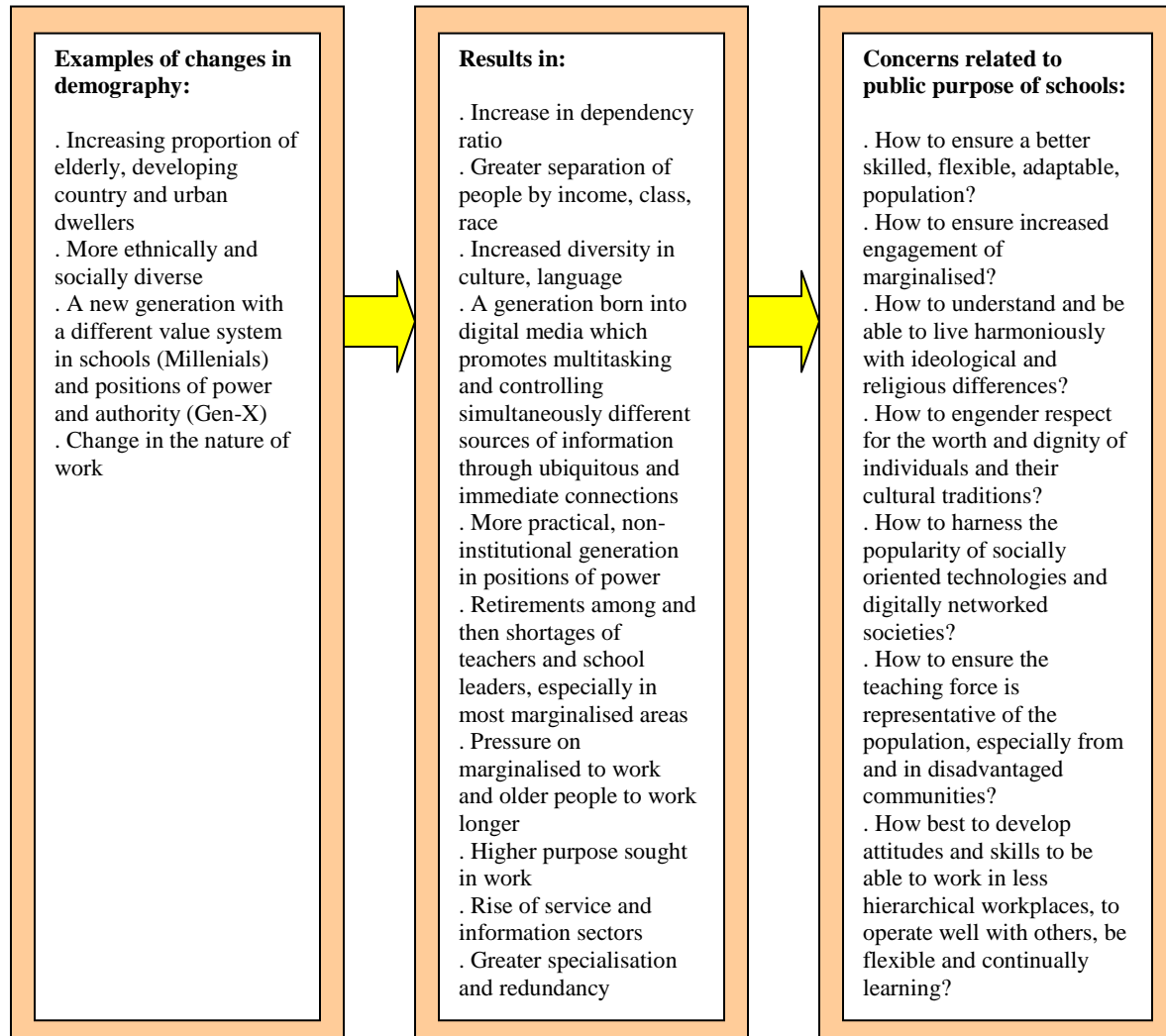
What are the forces that will shape the world in which we will live, work and provide education? In an attempt to introduce some organisation to the plethora of literature in the area, this paper first examines two ‘determining’ forces (the ‘north’ and ‘south’ points of the compass) of the advances in science and technology and changes in demography (including change in the nature of work). These two forces are followed by two others (the ‘east’ and ‘west’ points), globalisation and pressures on the environment. Examples from, the results of and concerns related to the public purpose of schools of each force are summarised in the following tables. While examined independently of each other, the forces are, as illustrated in the following diagram, interdependent.



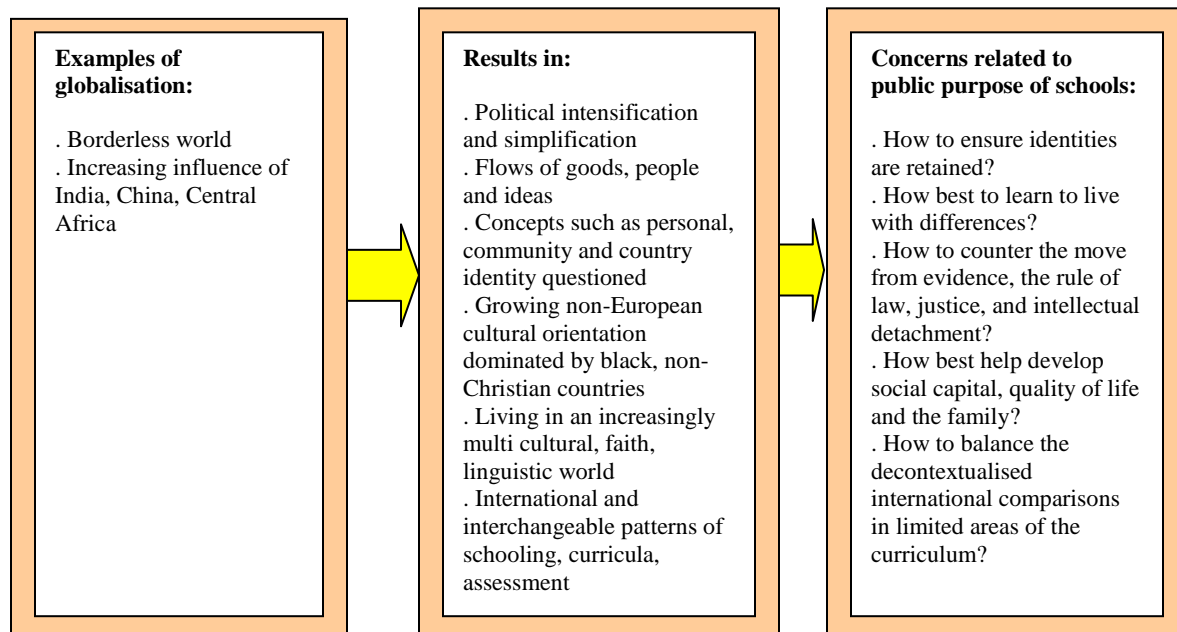
1. *Advances in science and technology*



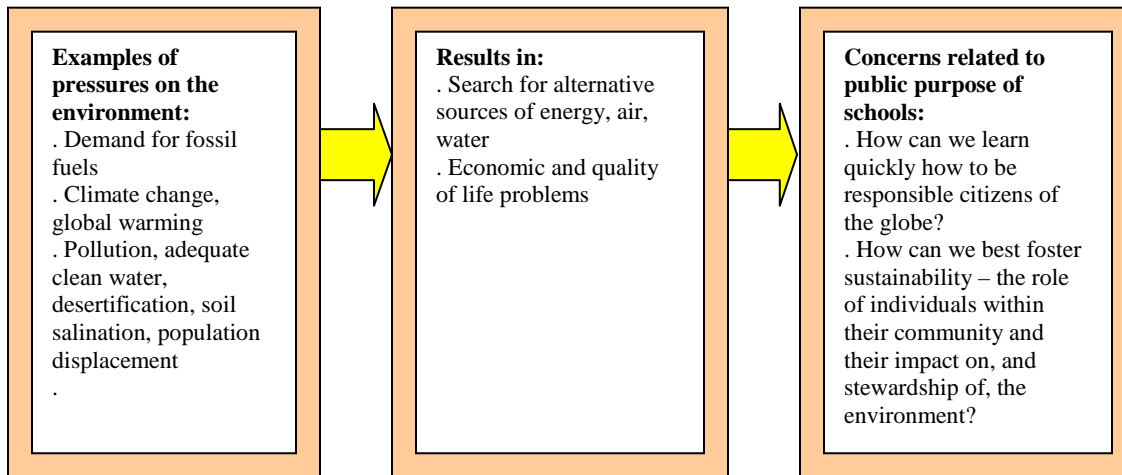
2. Changes in demography (including in the nature of work)



3. Globalisation

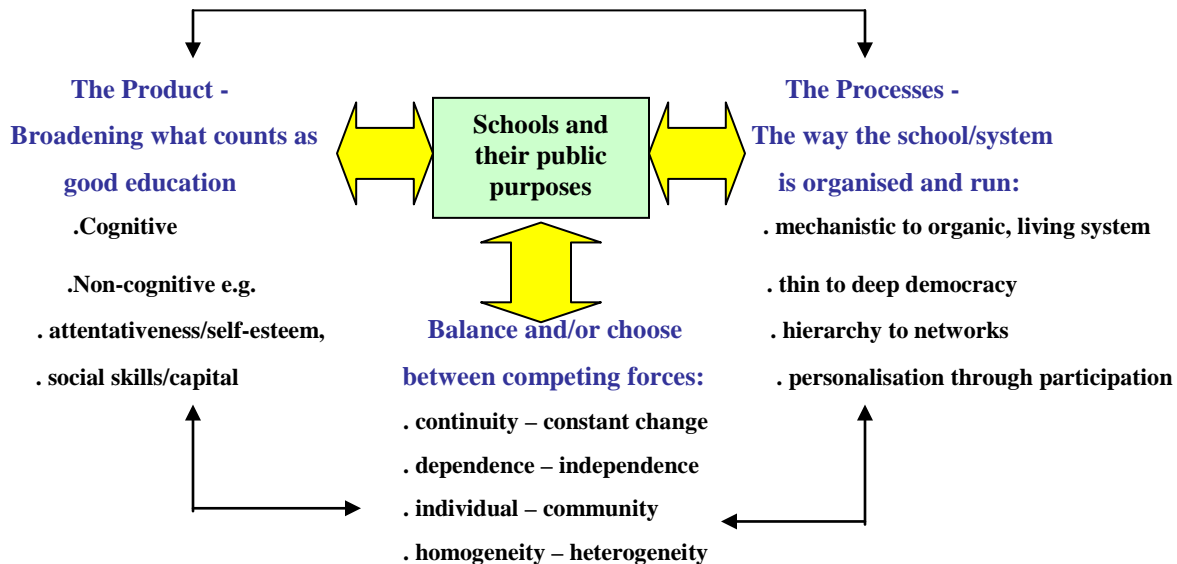


4. Pressures on the environment



Some Implications

What implications arise from our climb onto the balcony to overlook the stage, to detach ourselves in order to get a distanced view of close things? This question is answered through the interrelated arguments, summarised in the following diagram, that schools need to: broaden ‘what counts’; achieve a better balance, or make a choice between competing forces; and, ensure that school processes are more organic, democratic and networked. It is further argued that in order to best achieve the public purposes of our schools, arguments about ‘what’ (products such as broadening what counts and achieving balance and/or making choices) and ‘how’ (school processes) need to be consistent with each other. This position is based on research that indicates, for example, that how school leaders treat teachers is closely related to how teachers treat their students and, in turn, student outcomes.



1. Broadening what counts as good schooling

The forces on and increasingly permeating our schools show that to achieve some of their public purposes there is a pressing need in our country to broaden what counts for ‘good’ schooling. From the earlier analysis, these public purposes included:

- For individuals
 - Identity and quality of life.
 - Developing attitudes and skills for handling the speed of change, including through digital media which promotes multitasking and controlling simultaneously different sources of information through ubiquitous and immediate connections.
 - Making wise choices from and judgements about the amount of information available.
 - Being better skilled, flexible and adaptable and to be able to continually learn.
- For groups
 - Identity and quality of interaction.
 - Preventing the fragmentation of community, including through the building of social capital, families and ensuring equity of access.
 - Being better at understanding, living and working with differences and others.
 - Understanding how to harness the popularity of socially oriented technologies and digitally networked societies.
 - Countering a move from evidence, the rule of law, justice, and intellectual detachment.
 - Learning to be responsible citizens of the globe, including being sustainable.

Children’s achievement in a knowledge society is increasingly being seen as wider than the cognitive/academic and involves achieving both excellence and equity. For example, if we stress only scientific and technological knowledge, or only literacy and numeracy, we could languish in other areas, including physically, aesthetically, morally, and spiritually. In addition, research shows the increasing importance of non-cognitive factors such as self-esteem and social skills, in determining outcomes. These outcomes range from educational attainment to employment prospects and securing greater social cohesion. But some children are less likely to have access to experiences that will help them develop these attitudes and skills and, as a result, they are in danger of being neglected by teachers as well as being undervalued by pupils and their parents at a time when they matter more than ever. Non-cognitive skills are also more malleable than cognitive skills and thus more open to the influence of what happens at school.

2. Achieving balance and/or choosing between competing forces

A number of forces pull in opposite directions in terms of their implications for both the purposes and processes of Australian schools (Mulford, 2002; What’s Next, 2007). These forces include: equity and excellence, global and local (‘glocalisation’); community and the individual; sustainability and obsolescence; life and work; and, independence and dependence. Schools and their leaders need to either provide balance between these competing pressures, or to sometimes take a stance in favour of one force over another. For example:

2.1 Continuity and constant change

We believe the main challenge in a world of massive and constant change is how to foster enough internal stability in people and the school organisation in which they work and study in order to encourage the pursuit of change. Stability for change, moving ahead without losing our roots, is the challenge. It might be more helpful to remember Noah’s principle: one survives not by predicting rain but by building arks. Amid uncertain, continually changing conditions, many schools are, for example, constructing arks comprising their collective capacity to learn, they are striving to become intelligent, or learning, organisations.

2.2 Dependence and independence

Schools can be ‘pincered’ in the policy thrusts and accountability demands of both state and federal governments. There are a lot of people who want to tell those in schools what to do. This situation is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because many of those doing the telling do not seem to want to accept responsibility for their advice, are not around long enough to take responsibility for their directions and may even seek to prevent fair and open assessment of the changes they promulgate. Those in schools can continue to be on the receiving end, to be dependent, or they can choose to make a stand together, to be empowered, to be professional, and to be distributed leaders of democratic institutions proud to be strong advocates of what they do, including achieving the school’s public purposes.

2.3 Individualism and community

It may be unreasonable to expect the schools to pick up the slack when families fall apart, religious institutions no longer attract the young, children are malnourished, drug addiction is rampant and prime-time television programs are vacuous and educationally bankrupt. It is a time when advertisers and their clients have succeeded in not only rushing children through their developmental stages into a false sense of maturity but have also managed to link identity and status to brand names, and gang members; athletes, and narcissistic celebrities are the admired adolescent role models. However, if the home and school do not pick up the responsibility for our young then who will? We need to be reminded that change for the sake of change, including technological change, is not necessarily good; it must be tempered with wisdom, compassion, and justice. A skills crisis would indeed be bad enough but a values crisis would be devastating.

2.4 Homogeneity and heterogeneity

If you look for common denominators in successful schools, you will see that a strong one is to find a way to get some of the staff and students to do a radical thing, to take the initiative, to take risks. If a system is too tight for this there will be no search and no development. One lesson here is that reductionist approaches in education, to the complexity that is the world of the teacher and the student, should not go unchallenged. Uniformity for schools and education systems in aims, in standards, and in methods of assessment is a complexity-reducing mechanism. It is far tidier to have a single set of aims for all, a single curriculum for all, a single set of standards for all, and a single array of tests for all than to have locally developed approaches to school improvement. In brief, homogeneity needs to be resisted.

3. The ways schools are organised and run

The way schools are organised and run needs to be consistent with the broadening outcomes and balance of, or selection between, forces. Although perhaps constrained by state and federal demands, we believe schools need to move from mechanistic to organic living systems, to move from thin to deep democracy, achieve personalisation through participation, and move from hierarchies to networks.

3.1 From mechanistic to organic, living system

The 'machine' metaphor encourages a view of organization as a fixed structure of some sort, a structure consisting of parts that need to be 'oiled' if they are to function together smoothly. From this view, organizations require effortful monitoring, coordination and direction by someone, typically a 'leader'. An organic, or 'living systems', metaphor encourages a view of organization as a process, one of constant adaptation, growth and becoming that occurs naturally and inevitably in response to a strong desire for learning and survival. A description of organization-as-living-system bears a strong resemblance to accounts of organizational learning in schools and professional learning communities.

3.2 From thin to deep democracy

There is a need to move our schools from 'thin' conceptions of democracy based in the values of classical liberalism, and its concern with the right of the individual to pursue his or her self-interest and the resolution of conflict through 'democratic' majority voting, to a notion of 'deep' democracy. 'Deep' democracy involves respect for the worth and dignity of individuals and their cultural traditions, reverence for and the proactive facilitation of free and open inquiry and critique, recognition of interdependence in working for the common good, the responsibility of individuals to participate in free and open inquiry and the importance of collective choices and actions in the interest of the common good.

3.3 Personalisation through participation

A major debate taking place in the UK about the future shape of public services picks up on the confused contextual situation for those in schools. This debate is pitched into the chasm between the way public institutions work and how users experience them. For example, in the education sector it has been argued that efficiency measures based on new public management as reflected in targets, league tables and inspection regimes may have improved aspects of performance in public services. Yet the cost has been to make public services seem more machine-like, more like a production line producing standardised goods.

It is further argued that public services can be improved by focussing on what is called ‘personalisation through participation’, especially where users are not just consumers but co-designers and co-producers of a service. In schools, learners (students and staff) become actively and continually engaged in setting their own targets, devising their own learning plan and goals and choosing among a range of different ways to learn.

3.4 From hierarchy to networks

But personalised learning will only become reality when schools become much more networked, collaborating not only with other schools, but with families, community groups and other public agencies. While there is no blueprint for an effective network, it is possible to identify factors that successful networks have in common: design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure; focus on pupil learning; create new opportunities for adult learning; and, plan and have dedicated leadership and management.

Central policy managers need to work with networks as a way of generating local capacity and commitment to educational improvement and to provide a sufficient degree of local autonomy and flexibility in policy implementation to allow learning networks to become important allies on key priorities. In brief, networks need to be able to have respected input into, and be able to be constructively critical of, central policy directions.

Conclusion

The forces challenging the very nature of schooling, such as advances in science and technology, changes in demography (including in the nature of work), globalisation, and pressures on the environment, suggest that schools and their leaders need to broaden ‘what counts’, achieve a better balance, or make a choice between competing forces and ensure that school processes are more organic, democratic and networked. Schools and their leadership need to be judged on more than cognitive student outcomes (for example student self-esteem, social skills and equity), need to balance the pressures for continuity and constant change and be more independent, community focussed and heterogeneous.

In order to achieve the ‘what’, or desirable products of schooling, many of which link closely to the school’s public purposes, the ‘how’, or processes, need to be consistent. However, leading schools from mechanistic to organic, living systems, from thin to deep democracy and to personalisation through participation, and from hierarchy to networks will not be for the faint of heart. It will require schools and their leaders to radically rethink how they operate. Many of the basic building blocks of traditional education, the school, the year group, the class, the lesson, the blackboard and the teacher standing in front of a class of thirty children, could be seen as obstacles. All the resources available for learning – teachers, parents, assistants, peers, technology, time and buildings – will have to be deployed more flexibly than in the past.

Are your education system, school and leadership well placed to meet these new demands and serve public purposes?

