

LINK 5b: THE FORCES AND DYNAMICS SHAPING EDUCATION

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This article turns briefly to identifying some of the key characteristics of schools, schooling and education in recent years in Australia and the forces and dynamics, in particular those of a political nature, that have shaped these characteristics across the past few decades. It is these forces and dynamics that challenge how public purposes are conceptualised and enacted in school today.

In considering the purposes of schooling, and the public purposes in particular, it is important to understand that schools are now located and operating in a dynamic and discontinuously changing world under the influence of globalisation and other change forces as never before. Increasingly, these forces have multiple influences across system, policy, school, curriculum and classroom levels. In large part, the dynamics surrounding education in Australia mirror those evident in similar countries internationally. As these forces and dynamics shape education, previously accepted understandings about the purposes of education, and the public purposes in particular, arise as matters warranting discussion and possible reconceptualisation.

A major force shaping schools in Australia derives from state and federal government policies, with these policies influenced by both broader social, political and economic dynamics as well as reflecting particular ideological stances of political agencies. In part, these are influenced by business, church other sectional interests and the media. Government policies, emanating from both state and federal bodies provide multiple challenges for schools. These challenges are often compounded because, while education at least on a day-to-day basis has traditionally been the responsibility of state and territory governments, the last decade or so has seen increasing federal government influence, some would argue interference, in educational matters. Tensions emanating from this “new” role of the federal government in an area previously the remit of state governments are particularly evident when the governments at these two levels are of ideologically different orientations.

Despite the potential for ideological differences creating confusion and uncertainty for schools however, the underlying purposes and outcomes of education promoted by the major political parties in Australia in recent times seem not to be all that different, at least as these are articulated in their various strategic policy statements: in short, an economic orientation dominates. Notwithstanding this, differences in political persuasion across the national and state governments in Australia have led to adversarial stances being taken, illustrated by federal government dollars often being distributed directly from the centre to schools for specific policy initiatives, thus avoiding what they, the federal government, might see as interference by state education bureaucracies. Despite schools seeing positive opportunities in such strategies to access additional funding, such federally driven policy imperatives are usually only accessible if related accountability requirements are agreed to by schools.

Other major forces having significant impacts across recent decades at macro levels (government, system, policy) as well as micro levels (schools) include those related to notions of economic rationalism, corporate managerialism, new public management, choice theory, the market and competition. Indeed, all schools in Australia – state and non-state – now operate along what are essentially business lines. The business language of efficiency, effectiveness, outcomes and accountability has been very much in evidence in educational settings for at least a decade. For many principals, this has resulted in a re-orientation of their role from a strong focus on educational leadership to something akin to a chief executive officer in the business sector.

Central or system-driven accountability is a fundamental influence and shaper of education as never before. In one sense, in the current climate, it could be argued that accountability for schools – often defined via student test scores - drives resourcing and hence the curriculum. Funding for curriculum initiatives for example, is tightly tied to mandated accountability requirements, such as testing – if schools do not agree to specified accountability mandates then resources are withheld. At the school level and particularly the classroom level, one potential outcome of such accountability agendas, as evident elsewhere such as parts of the USA, is a homogenising and limiting of the curriculum - “teach to the test” notions start to dominate. This results from the “logic” that what gets funded and tested gets taught. Not surprisingly, as a result of such influences, the purposes and intents of education become blurred and altered.

In Australia, all schools – state and non-state – receive tax payers dollars to support their operations, with various government legislation providing the overall parameters for their activities and the obligations required for their continuation. Across recent years, there has been a marked shift in how these dollars are allocated to the various schooling sectors. Fuelled by the policies of the current federal government there has been a steady increase in the number of non-state schools across the country, including religious and non-religious based institutions. For example, in the two decades 1986-2006, the number of state schools in Australia dropped by almost 700, while the number of non-state schools increased by over 200. The policies that have led to this situation have been underpinned by the rationale that this provides greater choice for parents when selecting schools for their children: schools are like other institutions and operate in a market where quality determines their success or otherwise – parents can choose the best alternative for their children. However, this rhetoric of choice for many parents and students remains a myth in reality, as issues associated with finances, geographical location, mobility, access to transport and students with special needs create significant enrolment barriers. To date, Australia has not gone the next step in the funding arena to for-profit schools as in the USA and some other countries although some would argue this is next logical step for those policy makers committed to choice ideology. Consistent with such moves are the notions of corporate sponsorship of schools recently raised by the federal minister for education.

The change in the number and profile of state and non-state schools across the country in recent years has, not surprisingly, been paralleled by a steady drift in student enrolments from the state to the non-state schooling sectors. The reasons for this are vigorously contested, with some arguing it is a demonstration that choice theory is working in practice and that it shows that parents see the non-state sector offering

better quality schooling options for their children. Others see it as a consequence of inequitable funding, the latter to the detriment of the state sector. Still others argue there is an aspirational element underlying some parents' decisions about schools. To counter the enrolment drift, some state education systems have adopted what might be seen as "non-state school strategies" to combat perceived community perceptions about the quality of the state school sector, establishing schools of academic excellence based around what might be seen by some as elitist criteria such as streamed academic entry. Such moves generate another level of competition over and above that between state versus non-state schools, namely one involving state versus state schools. While these strategies endeavour to retain high calibre students in the state sector, they may in fact contribute to residualisation of some state schools from where the most talented students are drawn.

Quite clearly, schools systems and schools themselves have responded and been shaped by a raft of changes and policy imperatives brought about by globalisation and some of the other forces already noted. Over and above these, there is background rhetoric about a failing curriculum, failing schools and failing teachers. Debates about a national curriculum, standards, national and international benchmarks and testing regimes resonate in much educational discourse today. Noteworthy is that such benchmark and testing agendas typically focus on "core" or "basic" curriculum areas (such as numeracy and literacy) and rarely traverse other domains such as those focusing on the social, emotional and attitudinal development of young people. Despite this, many schools continue to offer comprehensive curriculum addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of young people.

With respect to the curriculum, some would argue there is a need for a greater focus on traditional learning domains and that this could be achieved by un-cluttering the curriculum from a plethora of "add-ons", many of these picked up by schools and relating to a range of social and emotional development agendas previously the responsibility of institutions such as family and church. The "problem" of "poor" teachers, some would see, could be addressed by more rigorous performance management processes and financial incentives for the best performers, however they might be "assessed". Business and media interests also regularly re-enforce negative notions about schools, education and teachers. Often the outcome of this is the creation of a sense of a crisis in education and schools where the negatives seem magnified and the positives often ignored or underplayed.

All of this is occurring in a wider societal context where families generally are now less directly involved in school life due to work-life balance challenges and changing family structures and where schools are looked at increasingly to address a variety of society's problems, such as childhood obesity. At the same time, education in recent years has been seen as having an overriding economic purpose and that it is essentially about skill and knowledge development for employment and further education: it is argued that Australia's competitiveness and its very future depends on this. Some of the related rhetoric is about "earning or learning" notions.

Schools have also recently been called upon to address broader national social agendas such as teaching Australian values. The key architect of these calls, the federal government, has provided financial incentives to schools directly for specific initiatives such as flying the Australian flag and displaying posters listing their view

of what constitutes Australian values. It could be argued that the “teaching” of values in schools in this way is only a superficial response about what potentially could constitute important public purposes of schools.

In response to the shaping influences briefly canvassed here, schools, schooling and education are positioned and characterised quite differently now from the situation just a decade or so ago. This changed and changing state has impacted significantly on the overall purposes of schooling and the public purposes in particular. Since there is a considerable and increasing investment of public funds in Australian schools, it should come as no surprise that just what these public purposes might be in these early years of the 21st century is a matter of some interest.

It is timely, therefore, to ask what these public purposes are and how all schools – state and non-state – are, or should be serving these public purposes. Key questions arise as to whether public purposes as they have been earlier conceived have been sidelined by the market and competition in favour of very individual educational purposes; or have schools resisted this tendency?