



SCOPE

Strategic Commentary on Policy in Education

WHERE IS THE INNOVATION? WHERE IS THE PASSION?

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Innovation and passion are alive and well in schools throughout Australia. However capacities in these areas are increasingly constrained in a command-and-control approach that is leading to an unprecedented level of centralisation, standardisation and bureaucratisation.

My confidence that innovation and passion thrive is derived from engagement in schools throughout the country over the last five years, in many instances through direct observation in scores of schools, but also in seminars and workshops for hundreds of school leaders in every state and territory.

My concern about the impact of current constraints arises from the experience of these same schools and my ongoing assessment of progress in the 'education revolution', the centre piece of the Rudd Governments policy for schools. I released the first assessment on 2 November 2009 and reported a score of 43 out of 100 on the basis of progress on each of 10 criteria set out in the 10-point 10-year strategy in *Why Not the Best Schools* (Caldwell & Harris, 2008). I provided a quarterly update at a public forum on education in Hamilton, Victoria on 4 March 2010, reporting a marginal increase to 45 out of 100 in a paper entitled 'Why the education revolution is not transforming our schools'.

Marked down was 'modernising infrastructure', reflecting concerns about 'value for money' and 'value for learning' in the implementation of the Building the Education Revolution component of the economic stimulus package. Small increases were registered for 'national testing', reflecting the fact that publishing school performance on the My School website has not led to 'league tables'; and 'intellectual capital', reflecting the establishment of the well-resourced Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and its broad agenda to build the capacity of the profession.

Of deep concern is that important strategies that international evidence suggests are critically important if performance is to be improved are still 'missing in action', especially in relation to school autonomy and innovative governance. Two recent international developments may increase the urgency of getting a better balance in Australia.

In his recent testimony to the US Senate's Education Committee, Andreas Schleicher, who heads up the international testing program at OECD, provided an explanation of why some school systems perform outstandingly well. He combined school autonomy and innovative governance when he noted that high-performing systems maintain central control over standards and curriculum, but give local schools more freedom from regulation. In relation to the drive to create more charter schools in the US, he argued that the issue was not just how many charter schools were established 'but how to build the capacity for all schools to assume charter-like autonomy'. The same argument can be mounted in Australia.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard released the Educational Transformations report on school autonomy in October 2009, nearly two years after she received it on taking office, and has expressed support for the strategy. However, there has been little progress in most states, apart from nearly two decades of experience in Victoria and the recent creation of a small number of 'independent public schools' in Western Australia. It is the Federal Opposition that is setting the pace on the matter and policy in respect to autonomy and governance may be on the battleground in the forthcoming federal election.

The second international development is the release of the report of the Cambridge Primary Review in England published under the title *Children, their World, their Education* (Alexander, 2010). Project Director Robin Alexander is in Australia as Miegunyah Visiting Fellow at the University of Melbourne. He delivered the Dean's Lecture at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education on 10 March 2010 on the topic 'The Perils of Policy: Success, amnesia and collateral damage in systematic educational reform'. Many of the fears in Australia about the dysfunctional effects of national testing, an excessive focus on and unrealistic expectations for standards, the narrowing of curriculum, and high levels of stress for students and teachers have been borne out in experience in England.

Alexander was careful not to make comparisons or offer recommendations about the implications for Australia but the message was not lost on his audience. I sensed that many were shell-shocked, especially when he drew comparisons of England with Finland, which has no national tests, has decentralised decision-making and provides high levels of school and teacher autonomy. Finland has a high-performing school system where students do not start school until they are seven. Finland is in the top ranks of nations as far as innovation is concerned (see the evidence on innovation in Finland in *Re-imagining Educational Leadership*, Caldwell, 2006). Also sobering was the way Alexander contrasted the 'spin' of government in England, overstating outcomes, with the 'substance' of the reforms, which mostly reflect a flat lining in achievement.

There is a danger in Australia that the dysfunctional effects of current policy will inhibit passion in learning as well as innovation in schooling. In an eloquent statement at the launch of the Schools First initiative in 2008, Julia Gillard declared that 'All children have some gift and even some potential greatness within them. Finding that gift, nurturing it and bringing it to life is the responsibility of every single one of us'. Her words echo those of Sir Ken Robinson, who is a powerful advocate of an intensely personal approach to learning. Writing in *The Element* (Robinson, 2009) he stated that:

Education doesn't need to be reformed - it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.

But Robinson warns that the policy framework in England, now being replicated to a large extent in Australia, will impair the nurturing of the 'gift' and 'potential greatness' of which Gillard spoke:

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education. (Robinson, 2009)

The updated report card on progress in the 'education revolution' should be understood in its context. The criteria on which it is based were derived from the 10-point 10-year strategy for transformation set out in *Why Not the Best Schools*. It is barely three years since the notion of an 'education revolution' entered the political lexicon in Australia. However, unless centralised, standardised and bureaucratised approaches are soon balanced by a relatively high degree of school autonomy and innovative governance, it is almost certain that expectations will be dashed at the same time that innovation and passion in learning will be sharply constrained.

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