

Can we create a form of public education that delivers high standards for all students in the emerging knowledge society?

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The maintenance and promotion of a strong public education is now more critical than ever as the new knowledge economy requires multiliteracies. In a period of growing cultural diversity, pluralism and social fragmentation, public schools are central to community and citizenship formation. Yet the trend in many Anglophone nation states has been to marketise and privatise public schools, setting them up in competitive relationships with each other as the post welfare state has dis-invested in education. This creates social division based on ethnic, racial and class lines. Quality learning for the new knowledge economy is more likely to occur in environments that are premised upon care, co-operation and compassion in a well-resourced system of public schools supported by a quality teaching profession that takes responsibility for all students and focuses on access, participation, inclusiveness across a broad range of learning outcomes.

Within many Anglophone nation states there is significant debate about the future of public education and its ongoing capacity to provide quality education. The new knowledge economy not only challenges the position of educators as the primary producers, disseminators and authorisers of what is valued knowledge, but also requires them to prepare students for new ways of working with that knowledge. In the service economies of post-industrial Western nations, 'knowledge work' is critical to national productivity and international competitiveness. At the same time, the globalisation logic suggests that the nation state is under threat, and therefore its role as provider of universal services such as education is also threatened.

A critique of neo liberal market policies in education

In response to the emergence of the knowledge economy, governments during the 1990s adopted neo liberal market policies. In England, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and to a lesser extent in the USA, governments implemented various structural adjustments, including public sector reform based on private sector best practice, dis-investment in education, health and welfare to fund national debt repayments, replacement of domestic consumption with export production to balance the budget, and deregulation of labour and financial markets to seduce overseas investment (Carnoy, 1998). In education, they pursued managerialism in the form of devolution to self governing schools, and marketisation in the form of increased competition and public choice. Localisation of school governance was advocated as being more efficient and responsive to local communities and individual student needs. Learners were portrayed as self maximising, autonomous, self-motivated consumers. Devolution based on market principles was promoted to increase the flexibility for individual schools to 'contract out' support services previously provided systemically and to facilitate local selection of teachers (Caldwell and Hayward, 1998).

English and Australian research now suggest that there is now evidence to suggest that such structural reforms have not increased student learning outcomes and that managerialism and marketisation have tended to shift energy, funds and focus away from teaching and learning (Whitty, et al., 1998; Gewirtz et al., 1995). They, as others, argue that the effect of the new managerialism has been to reassert executive prerogative, reduce teacher collegiality, undercut teacher professionalism and autonomy, and inhibit rather than encourage the type of school based creativity and innovation critical to producing the multiplicity of pedagogical practices and

curriculum frameworks appropriate to the new knowledge society (Blackmore, et al., 1996, Townsend, 1997).

Marketisation promoting highly competitive relationships between individual schools and students has tended to discourage co-operation, sharing of best practice, and the types of learning networks that facilitate communication and exchange of new professional knowledge (Woods, Levacic and Hardman, 1998). Education markets have tended to work against equity and valuing of diversity, promoting monocultural images of good schools and good students. 'At risk' students are seen as non-marketable commodities when it comes to attracting sponsors and clients (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Market popularity is often less an indicator of effective teaching and learning, and more an indicator of the capacity of some schools to select students through a range of implicit exclusionary practices (Fine, 1995). Popular 'cruising' schools do not necessarily 'add value', but can successfully harvest the cultural capital of selective student intake. Less popular schools meanwhile pick up the 'difficult' students, often producing quite innovative programs in order to meet diverse student needs (Stoll & Fink 1997).

Other criticisms of neo-liberal market policies in education stem from a questioning of the implied assumption that schools can be likened to businesses. Whereas private organisations (and private schools) have responsibilities only to individual clients or shareholders, public schools not only certify and act as social selectors, but have a civic responsibility to take all comers. Furthermore, not all parents have the same choices. Parental involvement in market-oriented systems often reduces to exercising choice to select or exit a school rather than a voice in school governance (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Markets tend to further entrench socio-economic, racial and ethnic inequality, exacerbating and institutionalising educational inequality between rich and poor students and communities along racial and ethnic lines. Advantage breeds advantage. Social mix is an important element related to a school's culture of success, parental and teacher expectations, the types of pedagogies, quality of student / teacher interaction and peer cultures - all critical to student achievement (Thrupp, 1999).

Devolution and de-regulation have also required new feedback and monitoring mechanisms for governments 'to be seen to be' accountable, explaining the policy shift during the 'nineties away from input and process to outcomes. Re-regulation of schools and teachers has generally been achieved through more prescriptive curricula, funding targeted priorities, and strong accountability mechanisms upward to the state through the new disciplinary technologies of universal standardised assessment, performance indicators, performance management, teacher appraisal, school charters and reviews, and consumer satisfaction surveys. Governments have sought to measure and compare their performance against that of other states and nations, and to compare schools and teachers across and within education sectors. Devolution and deregulation has also allowed the state to reduce per capita expenditure and increase reliance upon student fees, funds raised locally by parents, or sponsorship. Any 'value adding' or 'flexibility' has largely been achieved by increased 'voluntary' local labour and resources (Townsend, 1997).

The paradox is that managerialism and marketisation have produced modernist responses to postmodernist society : standardisation and management accountability in response to diversity and flexibility. Being entrepreneurial and competitive has meant that schools and systems have undercut educational and democratic values of collegiality, co-operation and team work.

Public education, quality learning and the knowledge society

In the new knowledge society, most individuals will change jobs often, moving in and out of life-long learning as routine production work is supplanted by technology and new forms of work requiring

higher levels and diverse kinds of general skills. A knowledge economy involves approaching learning with a spirit of engagement, inquiry and reflexive practice, 'learning how to learn'. The other side of the knowledge society is the 'high risk society', which demands the resilience to deal with ambiguity, change and uncertainty. Education is thus not only about cognitive learning but also about developing a range of social, emotional and interpersonal capacities, including a sense of rights and responsibilities. Education is about the building of trust, identity and citizenship formation.

The outcomes focus of neo liberal market policies has diverted attention away from the conditions necessary for improving quality learning. The first condition for quality education for all students is a public education system. Only in public schools does the legislative base protect individuals from loss of their rights to a free education. But schools alone cannot be held responsible for the multiplicity of social and economic factors which impact on student achievement. A socially just education 'system' requires more than a loose aggregation of self governing schools seeking to maximise their outcomes without a sense of responsibility to 'the public', to other schools and all students. Investment in educational equity and diversity should be viewed as producing benefits, not costs, since it contributes to economic growth and cultural tolerance, the position taken by the European Union, for example. The history of equity reform with respect to poverty, race and gender indicates the need for both strong top-down state policies, legislation and political will, together with bottom-up innovation, activism, ownership and commitment.

Systematic support, preferably at a regional level across networks of schools and public agencies, is necessary to provide infrastructure for quality teaching and learning within and across schools, framed by mutual accountabilities for outcomes (Wong, 1999). Just as student learning is more likely to be the focus of teachers when embedded in a program of whole school reform, individual schools are more likely to focus on quality learning in a 'system' or learning network which promotes the values of co-operation, innovation, inclusiveness, diversity and equity. Schools will survive as institutions in the post welfare state as much for the quality of the care they provide and for their success in building up social capital and a sense of personal identity, as for skill formation, as learning will occur in a range of sites—at work, in the home and in the community.

The 1990s saw the simultaneous reassertion of laissez faire principles of the market, but strong central intervention in curriculum and assessment and vocationalisation of the liberal education. There is now considerable tension as schools seek to conceptualise a curriculum which captures the best possibilities of multiple kinds of knowledge and multiple learning technologies:- how to be simultaneously practical yet informed by theory, relevant to experience and informed by history, intellectually stimulating while recognising the emotional aspects of learning, inclusive but not without rigorous framing with respect to different cultural traditions, values driven and agentic, locally sensitive but globally aware. Green (1997, p.27) suggests with respect to the localised and global knowledge tension:

The best alternative to a monocultural, exclusionary, national curriculum is not the abandonment of national curriculum altogether but the development of a more inclusive and more genuinely pluralist forms within a common curriculum framework which is applied consistently to schools.

This requires systems to develop a better sense of what such frameworks may entail in general terms (for example, common pedagogically framed tasks rather than common content based around pedagogy). But issues of accountability remain. Standards language based on outcomes alone should be replaced by a language of quality learning which also pays regard to access, process and

experiential learning. Management accountability can be achieved through sampling techniques less pervasive than universal standardised assessment. Accountability to the community can be provided by more open-ended self evaluative modes of school improvement which go beyond considering only that which can be measured to reporting 'what this school is all about' (MacBeath 1999). Mutual accountability requires bringing self and external accountability together productively.

A lot is known about the conditions conducive to quality student learning. These include: quality student /teacher interaction; high expectations; social and emotional support; peer culture valuing all forms of achievement; safe environments for risk taking; a problem solving and activity-based focus; multiple pedagogies and assessment modes; authentic assessment; and negotiated and clearly articulated curriculum objectives. Quality learning means going beyond foundational literacy and numeracy as the measures of success. Globalisation, cultural diversity, self-managing work places as well as working on-/off-line make demands beyond mere foundational numeracy and literacy. They require multiliteracies which address the 'multiplicity of communication channels and media and the increased saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity' (New London Group, 1997, p.63).

New learning technologies mean that schools will need to undergo radical organisational change. Schools will increasingly disengage from knowledge and location and will no longer be the only places where curriculum is taught. Schools may become nodes in the centre of multiple learning networks (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997) as 'school work' occurs through multiple links with home, community, workplace, higher education and training. Underpinning such learning networks between schools, professional bodies, community organisations, governmental agencies and industry should be explicit collaborative relationships which focus upon matching student needs to appropriate learning contexts .

Teachers may no longer be the authorisers of valued knowledge in schools, but their importance will lie in their capacity to stimulate and tap into their students' needs and interests through creative pedagogies that assist students to develop a capacity to distinguish and make judgements between data, information, knowledge and that encourage social values and behaviours which underpin a just and tolerant society. Systems must invest in 'teacher effect' because this is what supports quality learning (MacBeath, 1999). This means teachers must become research practitioners, and systems must support teachers to develop reflexive professional capacities. This means recognising teacher professional judgement in matters of pedagogy, assessment and content. An activist professionalism is based on expertise, altruism and autonomy whereas a technicist professionalism is based only on competence to deliver to a particular group of students according to externally prescribed standards (Sachs, 1999).

Quality education in the new knowledge society is more than about standards. Quality for all students will depend on systemically supported networks, pathways and partnerships between communities, families and workplaces based on negotiated, shared values. Education is still and will continue to be a social, moral, political and emotional, as well as an intellectual practice. Quality education for all is more likely to be delivered by a strong state which invests in education and training. It requires a legislative and policy framework that puts equity requirements rather than management accountability first; one which is supportive of a network of flexible institutional arrangements, but within a systematic framework of mutual responsibility which does not allow individual students to disappear. As Saul (1995, p.45) comments:

...public education is the single most important element in a democratic system. Highly sophisticated elites are the easiest and least original group a society can produce. The most difficult and the most valuable is a well educated populace.

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