

Education for a productive future

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What does the Australian education system need to do now to enable it to be economically competitive on a global scale in the next fifteen years? What are the implications for our education systems?

Despite the difficulty of predicting the future, (for instance, would anyone twenty years ago have predicted schools would have access to global information of unlimited amounts instantaneously (ie, the internet), that almost seventy percent of students would complete secondary education – it was 31% in those days, the end of the cold war, Bosnia?), it is an appropriate time to consider the future so we can plan an education system that responds to it.

Let's consider 2020, the year children currently in the first year of school will emerge into the workforce. What sorts of skills, attitudes and understandings will be necessary for survival in the global economic community, and what changes do we have to make to education in order to get there?

What will the world be like in the year 2020? The simple answer is, we don't know. So how can predict what will be the circumstances for new workers nearly fifteen years away? Given that Australia has one third of one per cent of the world's population and falling, it is likely that our manufacturing industries will never make up more than a small part of the world market and it is likely that our cost per unit will still be higher than some other countries, even despite our current restructuring. Our natural resources will either continue to diminish or be subject to various cost fluctuations brought about by global markets or subsidies in other countries.

So it may be that the best thing we can sell will be our expertise. What we will probably need in 2020 are workers that are highly skilled, highly knowledgeable and independent thinkers. We will need people who are able to make decisions, to enable them to adapt to new work, or new techniques, or how to be entrepreneurial, when changes in work require changes in the workforce. Perhaps we need to add to this the desire to operate as a community, rather than as a series of separate units. This last one encourages workers to work and make decisions in concert with one another and encourages society to do the same, recognising that not everyone in society (or at work) will be able to make the same contribution. What we need is a return to the acceptance of the common good, something which seems to have diminished in recent years as individualism has taken over.

In order to do this we need to focus on literacy (but in the near future the term must be expanded to include both computer literacy and cultural literacy) and numeracy. For these skills and social development are inextricably linked. We cannot have real social development without having a literate community and literacy without a social concern is a hollow skill.

If this is the case we need to adapt our attitude, and perhaps some of our practices, in education. In recent times there has been a tremendous focus on post-compulsory and higher education as the major players in developing Australia as the 'smart, country'. In the last decade we have had many reports, such as Finn and Meyer, designed to shape the education system to our work requirements. We have introduced new terminologies, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Competency-Based Training (CBT) and large scale funding for adult training and retraining.

Yet there is evidence starting to gather that the focus on the top end is not the way to go, that such efforts are too late. American demographer, Harold Hodgkinson, has demonstrated that for every dollar we spend at the front end we save up to six to eight dollars on relieving various problems related to poverty, crime and poor health. A strong and well supported education system leads to a strong and capable society.

Educators around the world are starting to understand that, even within the school system, there seem to be two critical pressure points. The first is the early years of a child's education and the second has come to be known as the middle school years.

It is at kindergarten and the first couple of years of school that the first seeds of literacy and social interaction are planted. If they are not watered and fertilised well by the time the child is eight, the eventual fruit will either be withered or non-existent. Researchers ranging from Peter Hill at Melbourne University to Peter Mortimore at the University of London to Bob Slavin at Johns Hopkins University in America have indicated the need for substantial focus, effort and adult time to be allocated to these early attempts to make all children literate.

It is in the first three or four years of school that low student-teacher ratios, a strongly focused curriculum and active intervention for students who start to fall behind is necessary. This may mean that class sizes are higher for the rest of the primary school years.

It may also mean that we have to spend considerable effort and money on encouraging parents to play an active role in the literacy process. Just like riding a bike, the more you read, the better you get. Home libraries and parents who spend time reading with their children are just as critical as good teaching is in the first place. We need to find ways to encourage parents who may have struggled to read themselves to get involved in this process. Business supporting adult literacy programs may help in this process.

Perhaps in the future, as well business concentrating its support at the university level (through endowed chairs or support for particular courses) in areas that develop business, we may see companies supporting chairs in education or even sponsoring special literacy programs (for children and parents) in primary schools and kindergartens.

The second pressure point for education comes in the middle school, at the time when people are deciding whether they will leave at the legal age or will stay on to complete school. This has been a problem as long as education has been compulsory. A study in the 1890s showed that the group most likely to cause discipline problems were boys just below the legal leaving age who had decided they would be leaving. A hundred years later, nothing has changed.

The VCE, with its broader range of subjects, and the increase in support staff, integration aides, language aides, counsellors and remedial teachers in the 1980s, pushed the retention rates to all time highs in 1992. With the education cutbacks since 1993, many support staff have disappeared and the VCE curriculum able to be offered at many schools has diminished as well. Retention rates have dropped by ten per cent in three years and the bulk of those come from the group of students who need extra help and no longer get it.

Not surprisingly, this group are mostly the same students who had early trouble with literacy, students who have struggled to come to terms with education, or have experienced failure and feel that education has nothing to offer them. So again, spending money in the early years is critical to the health of the system as a whole. Since parents who succeeded themselves at school, who believe in the value of school and are prepared and able to spend money on, and time with, their

children are also those most likely to send them to a non-government school, then government schools are the ones that will need most help with early literacy programs. Both state and federal governments have recognised this issue and are providing additional resources for literacy. But these resources are being allocated at a time of diminishing resources to government schools in general, which means even more pressure being placed on government schools to cope with the demands.

The other real concern at this time is the lack of male teachers, both at primary and secondary levels. Men are choosing not to be teachers, for a host of reasons, including comparatively poor rates of pay and the recent focus on paedophilia at the primary level and poor pay and the perception of teaching being both stressful and low-status at the secondary level. What this causes is a lack of male role models, for children of broken homes, where generally the mother is the primary care giver, in the primary years and for boys who are considering leaving school early, but don't wish to discuss their problems with a woman teacher, at the middle school years.

Neither state nor federal governments have made any real moves to address this concern which, in the end, require pay rates that compare with other well trained professionals and an acceptance by the community that teaching is a critical component to developing Australia's future.

It is not appropriate to suggest that business become involved in offering scholarships or other incentives to males (but not females) to encourage them to move into teaching but it is appropriate to suggest that business raise their current support of teachers and teaching to higher levels than they already do. Their workforce depends on it.