

They say they want a revolution...

Dean Ashenden, Inside Story, 19 February 2009

WHAT THE Rudd government proposes for schools – better IT infrastructure, beefed-up national curriculum, improved transition to training or work, a focus on the basic skills of the disadvantaged, better reporting on schools' performance – are all achievable and worthwhile, but they are not even new, let alone "revolutionary." The government is doing itself, the schools and a useful word no favours by suggesting that they are. There have been revolutions in schooling before, certainly including the institution of free and universal basic schooling, and perhaps also the tumultuous events of the 1960s and 1970s that culminated in the Whitlam government's spectacular entry to the schooling arena. Other revolutions may come. There is work to be done that, if carried through, could be called "revolutionary." But as things now stand the Commonwealth lacks the machinery, the resources, and the mandate for revolutionary change in schooling. It has no clear, inspiring argument about why a "revolution" is needed, nor a picture of what it would achieve.

I would like to illustrate these points through observations from my time as a fly on the wall of schooling over more decades than I like to admit, then sketch some suggestions about the content of a "revolution" and about the government's program.

EXPLORATION of continuity and change in schooling is best begun at the level of its microbiology: the class, the teacher, their task. For example: a schoolroom beside the transcontinental railway, on the edge of the Nullabor, in 1935. Tooligie Siding was my father's first school, and he its first teacher. The deal was that if a community provided the schoolroom the Department would provide the teacher. The little rectangular stone and galvanised iron building erected by the fitters and pastoral workers of Tooligie assumed that the kids would sit in rows facing the teacher who would be standing at the front, and so did my father. He grouped his pupils by age and marched each age-group through more or less the same syllabus at more or less the same pace. A very few get bored because it was too slow (10/10). Some found they could keep up okay (7/10). Others fell behind (5/10). This was the rule even when, as in the case of my father's first school, there were seven age-groups and only ten kids in a single room.

My father was typical of his cohort in wrestling with the pedagogy they inherited. In not very systematic or even conscious ways they tried to make the schoolroom less formal and "teacher-centred," to encourage more interaction among the kids ("group work"), to make curriculum more engaging by relying less on texts and readers and more on an a la carte menu of books and other resources, to make assessment less discouraging and more useful, and to loosen up the almost North Korean lock-step parade of the age-groups through a prescribed syllabus.

Small outbreaks of such thinking and practice dotted the 1940s and 1950s, reached epidemic proportions in the 1960s, and achieved national legitimacy through the Commonwealth's dramatic intervention in the early 1970s. The Whitlam government sponsored innovation in curriculum and pedagogy, subverted the states' control of schooling by setting up its own machinery (the Schools Commission and the Curriculum Development Council), homed in on the needs of special groups including girls and "the disadvantaged," and instituted a completely new funding regime for both government and non-government schools. Much of this energy faded along with the Whitlam government and budgetary boom times, but the relationship between schooling and innovation did not. Nearly two decades on, in the early 1990s, it produced late and unexpected progeny when state, territory and federal ministers of education agreed that there should be a national curriculum, and that it should be set out not in the familiar form of syllabuses and content but as a series of statements of what students would actually learn, that is, as "outcomes." This might have been an important moment in our educational history but turned out to be merely revealing of what a "revolution" in teaching and learning might look like, and of obstacles to it.

THE CASE for building teaching and learning on a platform of "outcomes" is seductive. I was at first among the seduced, then the seducers; at conferences and seminars around the country I joined those arguing as follows. The new national curriculum provided the first-ever agreed account of what it is that students are to learn in which areas of learning and in what order. Its "outcome statements" would encourage teachers and students to turn their minds from what they were "doing" (Shakespeare, fractions, river systems, whatever) to what they were learning through the doing. Both parties would know where they were heading and why, and at what rate. Emphasising the destination as well as the journey would change assessment. Instead of telling kids how they were going relative to others ("norm-referenced") it would evaluate how close they were to

mastering a skill, a body of content or an understanding ("standards-referenced"), thus informing judgements about where to go next. It would be "formative" more than "summative." It would shine its light on "personal bests," and make possible continuous progress through validated success, for all.

One issue was that outcomes-based education, or OBE, would generate much more and more complex information about each student than even the fattest marks book could contain. Another was that it required a kind of neurology, a web of linkages between "outcomes" or staging points, on the one hand, and "learning tasks" and "learning resources," on the other. Software would solve these problems. I joined a small group of converts to develop an "outcomes-based assessment, reporting and curriculum management tool." We called it, evocatively enough, KIDMAP. (We christened our little company Mercator, which no doubt helped seal the deal with our biggest customer, a former geographer.)

The software made OBE attractive to principals and departmental officers as well as to teachers. Data from the level of the student and the classroom could be aggregated and analysed for just about any population (boys/girls, city/country, advantaged/disadvantaged and so forth) or unit of management (faculty, school, region, system), and so provide an empirical basis for judgements about where things were working and where not, and for allocating resources (and blame). OBE promised to restore the "accountability" that had vanished along with Inspectors decades earlier.

Teachers were at first strongly attracted to OBE. It was in many respects their own doing, a cumulation and culmination of that ceaseless tinkering, modifying and innovating in curriculum, pedagogy, student grouping and assessment. But as they drew closer it seemed less a variation on familiar themes than a different theme altogether. Under OBE's regime students would work in groups organised more by stage than age. They would do more work off their own bat, and would participate in "peer" and "cross-age" tutoring as both tutors and tutored. They (not the teacher) might be the ones to go to the computer to get an "assessment task," to record its findings, and to look up the prescription and materials for the next bit of learning. In a mutating class the teacher would be less a conductor, more a master of a five-ring circus, the workplace less like that little rectangle at Tooligie Siding and more like a studio or workshop. In short, OBE threatened the class, and the classroom.

The extraordinary resilience and durability of the class and the classroom justifies a significant scholarly literature. If, as the politicians like to say, the family is the building block of society, then so is the class of schooling: the teacher and his or her kids, in the classroom, door shut. The origins of this fundamental unit certainly long predate the Tooligie schoolroom or even the industrial revolution (its factories have often been blamed), and are perhaps to be found in the pulpit and pews of church and then of chapel. In any event, the class and the classroom are now deeply entrenched not just in the physical plant of schooling but in the hearts and minds of teachers in a way that goes well beyond their pride in the tricky craft of "classroom management." The classroom door closes, the teacher picks up the baton, the performance begins. The teacher becomes, for the next forty minutes, him- or her- *self*.

I recall the stomach-sinking moment when I saw what OBE looked like to teachers up close and personal. It came at the end of a day's PD ("professional development") in the use of our software which was, in fact, a glimpse of how a quite different way of combining students and curriculum might play out. A few of the twenty or so participants, teachers, were drifting by, dropping evaluation forms in a box on a desk from which I kept a discreet distance. Although these forms were folded I knew what they contained: this is too hard, they'd be saying. Most, but not all, would be too polite to say: what the hell is all this crap?

WHAT MIGHT have made OBE doable, and therefore attractive to teachers? The answer is necessarily conjectural, a guess at what might have been successful based on observation of what certainly wasn't. It is also revealing, as noted above, of why something "revolutionary" was needed, and why it wasn't going to happen.

The first requirement would have been several years' work, sponsored by a consortium of education departments, to develop a really smooth, appealing piece of software and then load it up with outcomes statements plus advice on how to interpret them and examples of student work at different levels, these linked to lots of the "stuff" that teachers crave – ways and means of assessment, "learning resources" for group and individual work and so forth – a giant cookbook, really, with recipes for every occasion and taste. In the meantime, there would be pilot work in a

few handsomely resourced schools to work out how to manage the shift from one teaching-learning gestalt to another, including how many and what kind of NCOs would be needed to help the change an army's direction of march. Then, if all went well, a roll-out – including a really serious upgrade of IT and physical infrastructure – over many years, perhaps spreading from a few schools to many to all, perhaps starting with a Year 1 cohort and following it up through the twelve years of schooling.

Whatever it is that might be imagined as doing the trick, what teachers actually got definitely wasn't it. What they actually got was a rushed and inconclusive pilot program in a few schools run by principals of the early-adopter type (genuine enthusiasm metred by an eye on the main professional chance). A day or two of PD from some FIFO (Fly In Fly Out) who wouldn't know yard duty from a non-contact period. Access to a shared computer if lucky, in the classroom if really lucky. Backyard software. "Outcomes" written in gobbledegook that had its origins in status anxieties of ex-teachers who'd found bolthole in the universities and which pretty well avoided the question of content, of what all kids should know. A cookbook with scarcely any recipes. Parents who could make neither head nor tail of the new report cards the kids brought home. It was a shambles.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this debacle is what it reveals about the sad decline in the reach, power and credibility of the Departments.

The Department had given my father his first employment as a sixteen-year-old "monitor." It had trained him in its teacher's college (just a few blocks from The Department itself), then sent him to one of the many outposts of its far-flung empire where he had taught from its syllabuses, its readers and its texts. He placed its cakes of insoluble SAG (South Australian government) soap by the drinking trough and hung its impermeable toilet paper in the drop dunny. He awaited in a fever of anxiety the visits of its Inspectors. In his nineties he composed a brief memoir; its most vivid and frequent reports were of nuggets of praise from the inspections of fifty, sixty, seventy years before. The Department had my father by the short and curlies.

The Department had no such grip on the teachers who filed past at the end of a hard day's PD. Indeed, one or two of the less discreet evaluation forms spoke for the rest in suggesting that only a bunch of head office wankers could dream up anything as unrelated to the real world of schools as OBE. Most felt about the Department as you do about Telstra after half an hour on the phone trying to reach an actual person.

It would be easy to join the teachers in their frustration and cynicism. But consider for a moment the predicament of the putative wankers. They worked with annual budgets in which just about every dollar was already spoken for, and in a three-year political cycle that made an eighteen-month plan notional, let alone one extending over a decade or more. They were obliged to use a tender system that ensured that a "national" curriculum would be delivered by a different bit of software for every system and – the following is with feeling – also ensured that the tiny company providing the software would be screwed so mercilessly that the only possible result was clunky, late and unreliable. (I soon learned the mordant helpdesk wisecrack: no ma'am, that's not a bug, that's a feature.) Head office had no money for a serious IT upgrade or for sustained PD, and no arms and legs in the field because the inspectorate was long gone and the bevy of "consultants" that succeeded them had been axed in subsequent budget cuts. There was no in-house brains trust; budget cuts had sliced through curriculum directorates too, sending waves of refugees into the universities. The training of the incoming workforce had gone to the academy, which took pride in not dancing to the Department's tune, while "professional associations" and "school-determined priorities" soaked up much of the exiguous PD budget. The men and women of the Departments had to nip and tuck, duck and weave to avoid anything that might have "industrial implications." They had to jolly along suspicious, resentful teachers who arrived for their day of PD at 9.00, left at 3.20, and took three longish breaks in between.

The Departments, those withered old Gullivers tangled by a thousand constraints, are the principal instruments of state and territory governments in schooling and therefore of the Commonwealth through its "cooperative federalism." Canberra axed its Whitlamite agencies in the 1980s and so, like the Pope agitating for a Crusade, has money and a capacity for moral intimidation but no troops. Moreover, as I discovered during a stint on the staff of the federal minister for education in the early days of the Hawke government, "cooperative federalism" is an oxymoron, at least so far as state education departments are concerned. The Departments might not be able to do much, but they can certainly stop a lot.

These once-great instruments of state have lost their anthem as well as their muscle. If the Department had my father by the short and curlies, it also plucked at his heart strings. He set out for the West Coast with a sense of romance, of mission even. His own life expressed its truth: he was the grandson of drayman, son of a cook and a gardener to the wealthy, the first in his family to even get near a secondary school let alone a university. What underwrote the almost totalitarian machinery of prewar Departments (I visited the Soviet Union in 1975, by the way, and it felt like an entire country run by an education department, complete with Inspectors on each floor of the hotels) was a widespread consensus about what and how to teach and about the purposes of schooling. The Tooligie schoolroom was erected by the working people of Tooligie at a cost of 16 pounds, a significant sum in the midst of the Great Depression, but they found it. And they got what they hoped for. A shared vision of schooling was still there when my father's children started school, after the war. The covers of our *Radiant Readers* showed two children (a boy and a girl), neatly got up for school, schoolbags on their backs, gazing along a road that wound its way over hill and down dale to the distant horizon where could be glimpsed the spires of a city, backlit by golden rays. Opportunity could be found on that long and winding road, ignorance banished by that radiant light of knowledge.

THIS GRAND VISION and its creatures, the Departments, combined to achieve great things. Four great things, in my book. They provided universal or near-universal literacy and numeracy. They gave entry to almost any compartment of life for many, particularly girls and the children of migrants. In due course they made extended schooling a common, if not quite universal experience. And they improved much in the experience of schooling, particularly for that sizeable minority of students who found in Years 11 and 12 a combination of choice and constraint, assessment and resources, incentives and sanctions, which got them to do their best work.

But these great gains came at a cost and with failures not commonly talked about by anyone except those notorious spoilt-sports and wet blankets, left-wing academics.

First, schools did deliver for girls and migrants but have not made much of a dent in that great maldistributor, social class (and, until very recently anyway, on the exclusion of Aboriginal kids).

Second, the hope of opportunity for a few has turned into the fear of failure for many. Schooling in my father's day looked a bit like a brick, six years high, with a little narrow ladder perched on top. At the end of six years a very few quick ones climbed onto the narrow ladder while the rest left having got what they came for, reading, writing and numbers. Few left empty handed. But as schooling went on longer and longer for more and more it looked less like a brick and more like a Dubai hotel. Climbing from broad base to a narrow spire by now eighteen or twenty years high feels less like a brief audition and more like an endurance race. Failure is now endemic and, for too many, unrelieved. Most kids know by about Year 3 whether they are cutting it or not. Their teachers usually know earlier than that. The universal opportunity to succeed is also the universal opportunity to fail. The dirty secret is that where there are ladders, there are snakes also. Purposes have become confused and have drifted ever further from realities. The most recent of several statements of national goals for schooling wants "successful learners, confident and creative individuals and informed citizens" from an institution charged with sorting out those who are from those who aren't.

Third, while the diet of the final years of schooling is for the top third or so richer than anything experienced before or after, the nutritional content for the rest is ordinary. Many leave with little to show for it except hurt feelings. That cost is not captured by the term "inequality"; it is something more akin to poverty, or malnutrition.

There is, last, something more diffuse and more likely to be pointed out by right-wing culture guardians than left-wing academics (although there is nothing intrinsically left or right about this or most other things in schooling), a loss of the idea that knowledge is better than ignorance, that the work of schools is *education*. The real point in the endurance race, so far as the runners are concerned, however, is what lies at the end (or what happens if you don't get there). The noble vision of education for all has thinned into the instrumental come-on of "equal" "opportunity."

Teachers might not describe their working experience in terms of this kind but many would recognise the description. They are the ones who have to cope with failure, unrealisable expectations, and their consequences. Particularly when combined with hormones, those consequences can be very, very unpleasant. Am I the only one who found *Summer Heights High* just too excruciating to watch? Many teachers dislike the racetrack side of their work, hence their

constant efforts at reform and improvement and hence also the initial appeal of OBE. The men and women of the Departments are often of the same mind. If you wanted to blame them for anything in the short unhappy life of OBE it would be for an idealism that blinded them to the fact that they were trying to make revolution from straw. They (and I) simply did not anticipate the mismatch between what we were asking schools to do and the resources, emotional, organisational, intellectual, political and financial, available to the task.

THE YOUNG MAN who arrived in Tooligie in 1935 would be hard pressed to comprehend the decline of the Department and its gospel, but from the vantage point of a school costing sixteen pounds the most ungraspable idea would be that a public expenditure of well over \$30 billion a year is not enough. How could so much be spent on schooling? And how could it seem so inadequate?

More than forty years ago an American economist, William Baumol, noticed that even as some social institutions become ever more productive (that is, produced more and more for less and less) others, including schooling, headed in the other direction. The former, driven by competition, consistently found new ways to organise the production process, particularly by substituting technology for labour, for which achievement labour is rewarded by ever-increasing remuneration. The latter, steadily increasing demands and pressures notwithstanding, have been unable to change the "production" process or substitute technology for labour but have been forced nonetheless to offer higher salaries to compete for labour with the productive sectors.

This "cost disease," as Baumol called it, has been exacerbated in the case of schooling because the chickens described above have come home to roost in the budget papers. As schools keep more students for longer so do expectations and pressures, particularly from the inmates, grow. Teachers' work becomes less clearly defined, less doable, more stressful. One response would be to change the whole set-up. Another, much easier to imagine and pursue, is to reduce its scale. Teacher organisations have long concerned themselves with the physical plant of schooling, particularly during the years of extraordinarily rapid expansion of secondary schooling, but their most durable and successful campaign has been to reduce class sizes. That is a very expensive business. Shaving even a single student from maximum class size can cost a state budget many millions of dollars. To cut them by 50, 60, 70 per cent, as has been done over the last generation or two, costs an absolute mozza. My Grade V class contained 63 kids. The student-teacher ratio for government school primary schools in 2006 was 16:1. Per capita spending in the decade to 2006 alone increased by 44 per cent in non-government schools and by 31 per cent in government. Governments spend more and more money on less and less productive schools.

What's more, those schools keep falling further behind. The "advantaged" of the world want, naturally enough, to stay that way. As the embrace of secondary education widened and lengthened they realised that standing still meant running faster. They tried to rig the race, not by tripping up the other runners but by giving their own team a leg up, with considerable success. The high-fee independent schools now spend about two dollars per student for every one spent on a student in a public or non-government (mainly Catholic) systemic school. As parents with kids in private schools well understand there is no such thing as a free choice. Less apparent is that no choice is an island, entire of itself. Putting one student at an advantage is putting others at a disadvantage. Spending is now more or less the inverse of what "equal opportunity" would require, and the Departments, like the late Soviet Union, are in an un-winnable arms race.

THINKING ABOUT a "revolution" in schooling helps highlight some features of schooling so familiar as to pass more or less unnoticed (and, as suggested below, disguised by things we do notice). These features of schooling can be named in various ways. The four arrived at here are: chronic problems in both the amount and distribution of funding; a downward productivity spiral, exacerbated by an arms race; and an educational diet of uneven quality, soured by a sense of failure for many, and amounting for a substantial minority to malnutrition; and the loss of a compelling sense of what schools are for. The common element is the work process of students and teachers, seen from the angles of cost, of experience, of consequences and of purposes. In other words, these problems are interrelated as well as deep-seated. And therein lies the case for thinking that changing them might require a "revolution" in schooling – and for thinking that they therefore may not get changed at all.

There have been major upheavals in schooling before and so there may well be more to come. Perhaps our present set-up will crumble as suddenly and unexpectedly as the Soviet Union (or Lehmann Brothers)? In the economic climate now emerging perhaps anything will be possible. If we set that aside, however, no one who remembers the noise and dust, the flaring trumpets and the

whiff of cordite of the 1960s and early 1970s would feel that we are in a revolutionary, or even vaguely pre-revolutionary times.

The new government in Canberra can't be blamed for that, and in the circumstances what it proposes is, as suggested at the outset, at least as worthwhile and doable as anything attempted by a Commonwealth government since Malcolm Fraser's day. Much of it is not new, and nor need it be. What the government can be blamed for, however, is loose talk about sponsoring a "revolution" which serves only to create un-meetable expectations, to thicken the miasma of cynicism about governments that surrounds public schools, and to hollow out a word that is still useful, even if only as a heuristic device.

There is, perhaps, one context in which the Commonwealth might use the word "revolution" to some point: it could sponsor some thinking outside the square of current policy and debate about schooling, about whether there really are big and chronic problems in schooling and, if so, whether and under what circumstances governments can do anything about them.

For instance:

- Would it be a good idea to concede that – as any state-school parent will tell you – public schooling might be compulsory and secular but it certainly isn't "free," so we might as well make the whole set-up fairer and more equitable by putting all schools on the same footing? That could be done either by funding non-government systems as we do government, or vice versa. As funding gets harder to come by, which it surely will, the latter might have some appeal. Could that be done through the tax system (perhaps incorporating a HECS-like scheme) so as to increase contributions by those who can afford it and increase support to those who can't?
- If there can be no "free market" in schooling (or anywhere else), and if the bureaucracies have outlived their historic usefulness, perhaps we should look elsewhere for inspiration? Why not, for example, a national school system comprised of units about the size of the regions currently used by government and non-government systems (in New South Wales, for example, ten departmental and eleven Catholic), each modelled on the Australian Football League with its wildly successful combination of socialism and capitalism, competition and cooperation, entrepreneurs and big brothers, its relentless use of data, its flash spending and – wait for it – its spending caps? In other words, set the objectives and rules, provide the wherewithal, and watch compliance like a hawk, but otherwise leave the players to play the game with vigour.
- What can be done about the quality of educational diet? Would it be possible and productive to implement the (latest) national curriculum via new agencies at Years 6/7 and Year 10 along the lines of the very successful Year 12 set-ups? They might offer curricula from which schools or groups of schools could choose as well as provide benchmarks for students, schools and regions to see how they're doing. More important still: they could replace pathetically inadequate programs for the "disadvantaged" with something capable of making a detectable difference to educational malnutrition.
- Are we stuck with ever-rising costs and more or less plateaued outcomes? It is hard to see in the coming budgetary circumstances how the public purse will keep on ramping up funding to schools as well as adding pre-schooling to the tab. On the "output" side, the only way to increase productivity in schooling, or at least slow its slide, is to mobilise the real (and, mercifully, unpaid) workforce, the students. If, as it insists, the government wants "evidence-based" policy then the evidence about the productivity of peer and cross-age tutoring ought to get it interested. More generally, are the class and classroom the most productive way to organise the work of teachers and students? Specifically, the monoculture of aged-based classes? Was OBE, as suggested here, a potent idea condemned by impotent machinery? What alternatives are there? Is the building block of schooling so cemented into place by the built environment, the trench-warfare between governments and unions, and the hard-wiring of teachers' minds, as to be immovable?

Perhaps the most useful work to be done in the short term is to change what gets talked about and why. Endless barneys about shares of funding to govvie versus non-govvie schools, or by state versus federal governments, or between parental and public purses is necessary but also trivial compared with the biggest funding issue – namely, that we don't put our money anywhere near where our mouth is. Another example: equating the grand idea of public education with state schools (as teacher unions like to do) muddles thinking about whether and how public ideals and rights can be pursued by means other than public bureaucracies and budgets. A third: talk about

“equality of opportunity” focuses attention on who moves from rung to rung on the ladder, quite forgetting that the shape of the ladder might be important too. One more: guff about opportunity, citizenship and the economy makes it hard to remember that schools are, above all else, meant to do something that no other institution can do, and that is provide each kid with a generous introduction to a rich, common culture.

Talk in and around schooling can be tiring and tiresome, and often leads nowhere. But nothing, big or small, ever happens in schooling without it. In “loose-coupled” (or shambolic) systems, talk is the only way to get something like coordinated movement. Making it worth listening to is part of the Commonwealth’s national role. And who knows, a bit of forward scouting might blaze a trail where the ragged caravan of schooling might one day need to tread. •

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