

Chapter 1: Schools and the Learning Community: Laying the Basis for Learning Across the Lifespan

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INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter we propose a set of agenda for schools in the 21st Century, arising from the notion of the learning community and acknowledging the importance of schools as having a key function in the provision of an enduring basis for learning throughout people's lives. Drawing on our analyses of policy documents emerging from the work of inter-governmental agencies and national authorities, our study of the application of new thinking in social and political theory to the development of educational policy, and our analysis of data collected in the course of an investigation of "best practice" in schooling, we identify new directions in educational policy and practice and propose a set of agenda for schools committed to the idea of lifelong learning. We argue that the aims of this undertaking may be realised through the implementation of such important objectives as:

- The provision of educational opportunities throughout life that adhere to such principles and policy objectives as: economic efficiency and advance; social justice, social inclusion, and democratic participation; and personal growth and fulfilment.
- The re-assessment of traditional school curricula and pedagogies in response to the educational challenges posed by key economic and social changes and trends associated with and arising from the emergence of those developments coming to be known as the "knowledge economy" and "learning society" of the new "global age" of the 21st century.
- The re-appraisal and re-definition of places in which learning can take place and the creation of flexible learning environments that are positive, stimulating and motivating for a far more extensive range of learners and which overcome the constraints of standardised curricula, age- and subject-divisions, narrow timetables and rigid approaches to pedagogy.
- The acceptance of the importance of the idea of "value-added" learning consisting of increased emphasis on individualised instruction, the development and monitoring of personal development plans, assessment of success in achieving personal learning targets, and the development of cross-curricular competencies integrating cognitive growth and the emergence and the cultivation of moral awareness and the capacity for moral judgement and action.
- The awareness that, whilst schools may be starting to be seen as less important as primary authorities for and sites of the acquisition of knowledge, they are

becoming more important in the socialisation of young people and the nurturing of young people towards the development of a sense of moral understanding and a movement towards an acceptance of civic responsibility and the need for community involvement and service.

- The evolution of inter-connected learning pathways among and between schools, further and higher education institutions, employers and other education providers, impacting on the formation of relationships between schools and a wide range of constituencies and stake-holders in the community having an interest in and a concern for the education of citizens for tomorrow.
- Promoting schools as learning communities and functioning as centres of lifelong learning catering for the widest possible range of needs and interests among all members of the community.

In the revitalisation of schools, we argue that the school committed to the idea of lifelong learning will be strengthened in its mission through the development of:–

- a clearly articulated strategy for change built around a unifying concept
- a re-conceptualisation of the place and function of schools in the community
- a preparedness to re-culture the school
- a readiness to invest in people
- a willingness to adopt an evidence-based approach to change
- an expansion of the outreach of the school to the local, national and international community
- a commitment to maintaining the momentum of change, sharing good practice and celebrating success
- a commitment to the idea of leading for learning

AN INTEGRATED MODEL FOR LIFELONG LEARNING – IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, GOVERNANCE, FUNDING

As we enter the 21st century consideration is being given to the range of purposes that have been hitherto articulated and instituted for education and the models that have been developed and applied for the provision of educational opportunity throughout life and the place to be taken by schools in such provision generally.

Policy

At a time when policy-makers and educators are beginning to examine anew some of the principles for educating children to prosper and grow in a changing social and economic environment, a number of questions are being addressed. If governments adhere to such principles and policy objectives as economic efficiency and effectiveness, social justice, democratic participation, social inclusion, equity, and personal growth, what implications arise for the provision and style of education for children

during the period of compulsory schooling? In respect to equity, for instance, gaps continue to exist in the provision of educational services for some young people labouring under disadvantage; school organisation, curriculum, teaching and assessment practices are not always favourable to the necessity of engaging all students in a broad-based achievement-orientated and complete cycle of compulsory schooling; and a divide remains between academic and vocational education and differentiated status persists between such programs and those emerging successfully from them. Questions also remain as to how new and still emerging technologies of learning are to be introduced in such a way that all students, irrespective of their socio-economic background, can enjoy the benefits of access to a high quality and empowering curriculum and experience educational success.

Considerations of policy documents issued by international agencies such as OECD and UNESCO, the European Parliament, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum, and governments in countries including Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, Singapore, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America confirm the place of schools as vital elements in the whole spectrum of educational undertakings and initiatives in societies committed to realising the vision of lifelong learning for all their citizens.

A number of themes runs through the work of these international and governmental organisations. These include: the emergence of an awareness of the importance of the notions of the knowledge economy and learning society; an acceptance of the need for a new philosophy of education and training, with institutions of all kinds, formal and informal, traditional and alternative, public and private, having new roles and responsibilities for learning; the necessity of ensuring that the foundations for lifelong learning are set in place for all citizens during the compulsory years of schooling; the need to promote a multiple and coherent set of links, pathways and articulations between schooling, work, further education, and other agencies offering opportunities for learning across the lifespan; the importance of governments providing incentives for individuals, employers and the range of social partners with a commitment to learning to invest in lifelong learning; and the need to ensure that emphasis upon lifelong learning does not re-inforce existing patterns of privilege and widen the existing gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, simply on the basis of access to education (Chapman and Aspin 1997, p.16).

These most recent commitments from governments are based upon a new and integrated model for lifelong learning. In this the focus is on: lifelong provision – insofar as educational provision is available across the lifespan – from cradle to grave; new approaches to learning – providing learners with the skills and capacities by which they can learn according to their own learning styles, needs and purposes; and learning that is accessible to all – insofar as learning should be socially inclusive and providing all learners with the confidence to engage in learning at each stage in life [Longworth 1997, p.5].

This more holistic, seamless and integrated approach to lifelong learning constitutes a significant departure from traditional models of educational provision. Such models were characterised by:

- sharp divisions between sectors and providers
- compartmentalisation of territory and remit between different institutions operating in the provision of academic and professional/vocational courses and programs
- an emphasis upon on-campus attendance with little attention to the possibility of off-campus course availability or multi-mode delivery
- a distinction between the acquisition of knowledge and the development of generic lifelong learning skills and competencies, such as: self-starting curiosity, doing research, managing information, taking independent action and initiative in problem-solving, working with teams in the achievement of common goals, communication and literacy skills, adaptability and flexibility in response to challenge and change, and building and deploying creativity and imagination
- the assumption of sharp cognitive demarcations between discrete forms and categories of knowledge, distinctions between disciplines and subjects, and separations between theory and application.

By contrast, the core principles underpinning new approaches to lifelong learning provision [Fryer 1997, pp.28–31] reveal a commitment to:

- coherence as an overall education strategy for government
- equity in providing learning for the many, not the few
- valuing people before structures as the focus of policy and good practice
- providing variety and diversity
- acknowledging the need for quality and flexibility
- building upon effective and inclusive partnerships
- incorporating shared responsibility
- building on a multi-faceted “whole” government approach.

Governance

The issue of governance and management in this more integrated approach adds an important dimension to the question of the implementation of lifelong learning and the place of schools in educational provision. Governments tend to prefer to work on policies that can be broken up and distributed for responsibility. The missions of lifelong learning, however, cut across government departments and administrative bodies and divisions.

In response to this, governments might be well served by considering the creation of an over-arching Ministry of Lifelong Learning. It should be pointed out, however, that there are dangers inherent in establishing some kind of ‘super Ministry’ of lifelong learning in which the interests of the schooling sector might be subsumed.

It is interesting to note that some of the most effective attempts to apply lifelong learning policies and schemes have occurred in those settings, eg. in Japan and some Scandinavian countries, where there are strong traditions of municipal levels of government and genuine political power at the local level for initiatives to take effect and succeed.

It appears that economies and dis-economies of size and scale constitute a factor in determining approaches to lifelong learning governance and management, particularly at a time when governments will be assuming the role of facilitator and mediator rather than monopoly provider of educational services, incorporating a wide range of educational providers, both public and private.

Funding

The debate regarding the best model of provision and hence of funding for lifelong learning is still in train and the issue still unresolved. The key question is, what are the alternative models for the provision and funding of learning across the life-span, that will best address and cater for the whole range of learning needs, provide the right start for all young people in their lifelong learning endeavours, and at the same time be economically efficient, socially inclusive and ethically just? Some maintain that, so important are the imperatives for the continuance of access to learning opportunities throughout individuals' lives, the provision of funding and other resources should be an ongoing charge upon the public exchequer. Others argue that, so burdensome would be the costs of providing that sort of access on a continuing basis, the government can do little on its own and would need to enter various forms of partnership with a range of other providers and operate in a mixed economy of funding provision. Yet others believe that, once one individual's basic learning needs have been attended to at a minimal level of public provision, they should then make their own decisions about what kinds of further learning they need and what pathways of cognitive advance they wish to explore, and for what reason, and seek to secure the further education and training they need, with funds raised out privately of their own resources.

The issue comes down to this. It is widely agreed that, with the increasing need for education across the life-span, the provision and funding of the whole process of education, from cradle to grave, cannot be met from the public exchequer and from government sources alone. Many people argue in response that the whole issue of educational provision should therefore be opened up to the forces of the market place. Against these, however, there are those who argue that, in a society committed to social inclusion, social justice and democracy, governments have a responsibility, at the minimum, to ensure that all young people – and particularly those from marginal or disadvantaged parts of society, where a strong and supportive safety-net of equitable social provision might be needed – have access to an empowering education during the compulsory years of schooling, which will provide them with a strong basis for their lifelong learning endeavours later on. Those of this persuasion argue that governments must, at the very least, accept primary responsibility for educational provision during the compulsory years, if all members of society are to have the knowledge, information and skills required for them to participate effectively in the processes of democracy and the opportunities of economic advance, as well as seeking ways and means of raising the quality of their own personal life-styles.

Such arguments are, of course, a function of people's and groups' deepest moral, social and political preconceptions and commitments. Among and between such standpoints it is clear that there are major and, in some people's eyes, irreconcilable differences. Such

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