

Preface

This book has its origins in comments about education made by influential persons in 2008. Rupert Murdoch, expatriate Australian, and media magnate, delivered the Boyer Lectures for the ABC in that year; Joel Klein was Chancellor of the New York City School system and had been invited to Australia by the then Minister for Education the Hon Julia Gillard to talk about education. What they had to say did not seem to make sense to me so far as the situation in Australia was concerned.

Their comments seemed to be along the familiar lines that Australians had to do better. Who could disagree with that? But the criticisms lacked resonance, they had more to do with the situation in the US from whence these people came as if, like many other things, we had lots to learn from that country and its policies and practices. Though Australia has developed very close relations with the US, seen particularly in the preparedness to join in armed conflict in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, it is not the US.

The essays comprising the chapters try to draw out the various influences upon education. Those influences go well beyond school which absorbs most of the popular argument. The book is a summary of what a reasonably intelligent person with an interest and preparedness to be critical where necessary might conclude. The essays are not comprehensive surveys of any particular aspect of education, of teaching, or of learning. They are not grounded in the intellectual discourse of educational philosophy or any particular political philosophy (well not deliberately anyway) though they certainly do not accept current economic orthodoxy and its notions of small government, pursuit of self-interest, and the merits of competition as a driver of prosperity. Rather they try to traverse the myriad influences which bear on the eventual education outcomes which result from the experiences that every one of us goes through. Though schooling is the most obvious component of those experiences, it is not the be all and end all of education. That is the first point.

The essays traverse some fundamental aspects of economics because so much of what we do these days seems to depend on a certain view of economics; generally, it is a very wrong view but for some reason that view is accepted. They also traverse community issues and disadvantage because poverty and economic and social disadvantage, especially poverty, so strongly impedes achievement, not least through its influence on health. Whilst education can help overcome the burdens of poverty, other actions are also important: there is a view that it is not just poverty but a lack of opportunity for development, development of the

individual especially, which is holding people back and limiting their social mobility. Increasingly even in the western world, people born into poverty die in poverty. That flies in the face of certain myths fundamental to societies such as that of the US. It is important to understand where one is and why, to acknowledge one's situation.

And the essays deal with the situations facing teachers, situations little different from those facing all employees, levels of trust in them and their professionalism, access to appropriate evaluation of their performance and to opportunities for advancement. That is tied up with views about economics and the views about the role of individuals in society and indeed the purpose of education.

Many of the essays deal with education as we are used to thinking about it, what is effective teaching, what makes for successful schooling. But first of all, what early childhood is like, what happens in those first few years and how that is so important in influencing what happens later. What is involved in the learning process and is education something that mainly goes on in school? The answer to the second question is no, yet it is schooling that absorbs most attention in the education debate. And again it is economics, or a certain view of it, which so influences both those processes, education in school and in life. Most especially it is the belief that people have which determines what we do, not necessarily any wider set of views which might be grounded in more substantial evidence.

It is the evidence which contradicts what many people seem to believe which is the core of this book. Quite simply, the most successful education outcomes derive from attention to basic issues of human rights and what characterizes humanity, a natural curiosity, and the ongoing amalgamation of new experiences into previous views, a wish to advance one's self and to have the opportunity to be involved in worthwhile pursuits. And it is based on the proposition that people with access to education generally have a good idea of what they want to get out of it. They respond to their own drivers, or try to. But how people behave is influenced by how they are treated and what is expected of them. Respect for the individual and high expectations are critical.

Unfortunately, there is a widely held contrary view that others know what is best for them. It recalls Charles Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind and his obsession about facts. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, there are still those who consider that transmission or rote learning or didactic education, the teacher at the front of the class, the students taking notes and being tested later on their recall of what was said, is what we should strive to return to. And that a return to basics, to literacy and numeracy, is vitally important. Forget creativity and the diversity of human interests and abilities and the variety of intelligences and the way relationships and experiences can strongly influence later outcomes!

Unequivocally, I take the view of people like philosopher John Rawls and economist Amartya Sen, that social justice means ensuring the opportunity for every individual to reach their potential and that so long as some do not have that opportunity, we have to strive to make it so. Indeed successful school systems are based on the proposition that every child can learn and that high standards should be set for every student. I also take the view that we can only understand enough to

see what, at the moment, might be the truth by being prepared to challenge the current orthodoxy, even when that seems to have the authority of those in power. It is not always a comfortable situation. It is too often a prescription not followed.

So in this book reforms which emphasize concern for early childhood, school leadership, and respect for teachers are contrasted with ones based on standardized tests, private schools, and sacking bad teachers.

Clearly what works in certain circumstances, does not work in others. That is true of education as it is of most situations. Yet people are people, organizations are organizations, and societies are societies: similar beliefs and actions seem to produce similar outcomes though culture and history play a significant role. At the same time different societies provide lessons for us which challenge us to think about what we believe are appropriate in our own society.

Celebrated physiologist, bird watcher, and author Prof. Jared Diamond of the University of California is just one person who has recently alerted us to just how many lessons there are to learn from other societies in his book, *The World Until Yesterday; What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?* (Viking 2012). In doing so he has illuminated the richness of humanity. Some anthropologists and advocates for traditional societies criticized his approach: that ought to encourage us to think about the arguments rather than reject his views out of hand! In truth anthropology can both illuminate humanity and divide it.

In a world dominated by neoliberalism and its promotion of choice and financial rewards the demand for accountability is shrill. But that accountability means metrics that unwind the most exciting aspects of teaching and learning—intelligence and creativity and the search for new relationships: innovation.

All those mantras about learning from the past and ultimately failing for not doing so are correct, but individual and collective actions can make a difference, even in the face of seemingly immovable obstacles. Unfortunately there are a very large number of obstacles. But the attempt to achieve the best must go on. This book might help to encourage that.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-01993-2>

Education Reform: The Unwinding of Intelligence and
Creativity

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2014, XXI, 320 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-01993-2