

Leadership in NSW: college principals

ANDREW NEWMAN explains the evolving role of a college principal in NSW.

Interstate colleagues looking at the NSW model of colleges are often perplexed as to how such a model came into existence. Some colleges have a structure that includes a separate college principal, in addition to each campus having a principal. Other colleges have a campus principal who takes on both roles.

Background to the college model

THE first college in NSW was the Nirimba Collegiate Group of Schools, which was established in the 1990s. This was followed by Chifley, Dubbo, and Georges River. As more colleges were developed, the then Deputy Director General for Education and Training, Dr Alan Laughlin, signed off a memorandum of understanding with the NSW Teacher's Federation, in March 2001. This created a position called 'college principal'. This position was additional to that of a 'campus principal'. At that time, campus principals were still the operational principal for the campuses within a college. Each principal was line managed by the relevant School Educational Director.

Colleges have been established at Brisbane Water, Callaghan, Chifley, Dubbo, Georges River, Great Lakes, Moree, Nirimba, Northern Beaches, Sydney Secondary and Tuggerah Lakes. Around 23,000 NSW students now attend these colleges.

Over time, colleges developed different models of operation. In many cases, they have developed close associations with TAFE (Technical and Further Education), universities, adult and community education providers and local industry. Under the original memorandum of understanding, the role of college principal was not one of line management. Rather, it was a model of coordination and cooperation, among a group of principals, for the betterment of colleges.

Role revised in 2006

A slightly different model, based on a new memorandum of understanding, was introduced in 2006. This revised some of the earlier understandings about how a college principal would operate. Now, each college was to have a college principal position, with overall management responsibilities. The revised model allowed for a campus principal to have a dual role (that is, a combined college principal and campus principal role). However, this provision will be reviewed before the expiry of the memorandum of understanding in 2009. The current role of a college principal involves:

- leadership across the college and its community
- developing a vision for the college and enunciating it
- managing the college, in conjunction with the campus principals, as one school on many sites
- leading the strategic planning for the college, from which the campuses develop their plans
- promoting the work of the college to the community, other government agencies, partner primary schools and educational organisations
- monitoring performance across the college and working with the campus principals and staff to ensure that students maximise their learning.

The college principal role is still evolving in colleges as the new memorandum of understanding has been implemented. A college principal does not have line management responsibilities but is responsible for college issues and the implementation of college programs. Each principal still reports to the School Education Director, as line manager.

Leadership and collegiality

Leadership and collegiality has proven to be one of the major benefits of the college structure. As a principal in a comprehensive year 7 to 12 high school, there

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with the campus principals on all sites. The strategic plan for the college is developed with the Management Committee, and the campuses. Members of the local community are also involved.

Community liaison role

A major role for the college principal is to promote and represent the College in the local community. Close relationships with businesses, parent groups, community organisations and educational institutions are being nurtured. Many organisations have expressed a preference for dealing with the college as one entity, compared to dealing with a number of individual schools. Many colleges have developed courses with universities and local businesses that have had major benefits for students in year 12. Broadening of the curriculum has been a positive development.

One area where CMGs have been able to develop initiatives is with the use of the College General Staffing Entitlement (CGSE). In NSW, high schools are staffed on a sliding scale for years 11 and 12. The first 210 students in years 11 and 12 generate 15.5 staff, plus 0.058 for each additional student. When concentrating the students on one senior campus, there are economies of scale. If you divide this staffing allocation by the number of campuses in a college, you get a difference that is, in effect, the cost to the Department when we operated as separate schools. This difference is the CGSE and, in the case of my college, this translates into 6.64 staff. More campuses generally mean a higher CGSE. The CGSE has been used in many innovative ways, to create additional executive positions, such as college deputy principals. These positions have allowed colleges to develop programs across campuses and to work even more cooperatively to enhance student outcomes.

The role of college principal position is slightly different in each location. However, what is common to all colleges is a model of collaboration, where school leaders work closely with each other, and support each other, for the overall benefit of many students.

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are times in decision-making that make you feel very lonely. The college structure, with a College Management Group (CMG) made up of the principals, means that you have colleagues who work closely with you. Many decisions are made collectively. Sharing the expertise of several experienced leaders has benefits for all, especially in terms of the personal welfare of individual principals.

Develop a vision for a college requires all campuses to work together. This is a culture change that college principals have to work towards. Before becoming part of a larger college, all campuses were 'stand alone' schools. Having to take into account other campuses, and colleagues, has required many meetings, emails and phone calls. College internal structures are still developing in response to the different needs of component campuses and the new college structure.

Each college has had to develop a College Management Group (CMG). The CMG is made up of all the principals. However, in some colleges, deputy principals attend many of the meetings, so there is continuity if the principals happen to go on leave. The CMG makes decisions that are relevant to the whole college, and the college principal has responsibility for overseeing that college decisions are implemented in conjunction

NSW

Jim McAlpine



THE premier state is moving towards an exciting election on 24 March 2007, although some might think that both sides of politics are trying to avoid a victory. Premier Iemma has had more than a fair share of controversy, and Opposition Leader Debnam has managed to turn advantage on its head with a unique approach to leadership. Anyone would think that they were more interested in the outcome of the Federal election later in the year. Meanwhile, educators continue to wonder when principals and teachers will be given a modicum of professional respect by the polities instead of being the whipping posts for every societal ill. The media also love the simple stories, and have a propensity to zero in on what they see as disasters. One day they - and the politicians - might discover some of the wonderful achievements that occur in NSW schools, especially with our international competitiveness.

Professional lobbying firm

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council and Primary Principals' Association have moved onto another plane, with the decision to engage a professional lobbying firm to make sure that their messages concerning the importance of sustaining quality schools are heard by all sides of politics, as well as by the community. The intention is to influence political opinion in the lead-up to the NSW election, and then to influence federal politicians later in the year. It was felt by both principals organisations that it would be money well spent to get favourable outcomes for their schools, regardless of which party controls the Treasury benches.

The media has shown a more even-handed approach than usual by highlighting the increases in fees charged by government-funded private schools. Part of the rationale for fee increases, which are significantly greater than the inflation rate, is the increasing cost of salaries. Teachers in all schools will be surprised to find that their salary increases have been so much more than inflation. Finally, student reports continue to be the source of dispute between the State Government and the NSW Teachers' Federation. A resolution may occur this year, but only when other tensions arise as a result of the Federal control agenda in education.

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and Training, The Central Coast and Industrial Relations. Subsequent to this, Michael Coutts-Trotter (most recently Director-General of Commerce) has been appointed as the Director-General of the NSW Department of Education and Training, replacing Andrew Cappie-Wood. The political landscape of the NSW education governing portfolio has been significantly reconstructed in recent weeks. However, the focus from unions, the Federation of Parent Groups and professional associations will continue to illuminate and pursue the implementation of pre-election proclamations. This includes the statement that public education is *'the means by which the values of our community are communicated to its citizens'*, while providing *'opportunities for everyone, irrespective of wealth, background and location'* (the Hon. Carmel Tebutt MP, 10 March 2007, in the lead-up to the election). Such statements are supported by a scope of recently announced programs including:

- an extensive capital works program
- the Premier's Sporting Challenge
- Combating Climate Change
- the Learn or Earn policy
- workforce training programs
- Literacy in the Early Years
- transition programs
- support for beginning teachers.

The progress of many of these programs will be included in future reports. As investments in schools, they are most welcome by the public education sector, complementing the informed work of principal groups and commissioned work, such as the recently launched research paper, 'Time and Tide', by Dr Lyndsay Connors. This paper has the potential to further inform the debate about appropriate support for beginning teachers, infrastructure and sustainability. The combined commitment of the NSW SPC (Secondary Principals' Council) and PPA (Primary Principals Association) through the Sustaining Quality Schools (SQS) Project, including the engagement of a professional lobbyist, will ensure a focused spotlight on the announced programs, value statements and future policy developments.

Emergent issues and federal impositions will continue to lay siege on the State's educational policies and priorities. Therefore, other significant issues will no doubt surface at a state level, as public opinion is dictated and consumed by the federal political/educational agenda. The lobbyist firm will continue to strengthen our influence over political federal and state opinion as we move towards the Commonwealth election later in the year.

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NSW

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OUR State election is recently over and, as was expected, the ALP was returned. For New South Wales education, this has resulted in the changing of the guard on several fronts. The Hon. Carmel Tebbutt MP, Minister for Education and Training, has decided to spend more time with her family. Consequently the Hon. John Della Bosca MP has been appointed as Minister for NSW Education

A to E grading is indefensible

NSW principal JUDY KING expresses her view on changes to student assessment and reporting. Readers are invited to respond with their own views, explaining how the changes have impacted on their schools.

SCHOOLS do not need politicians of state or federal persuasion determining the fine detail of assessment and reporting policies and procedures for students in all schools throughout Australia

We are very concerned at Riverside Girls High School about the alienation of students at risk and those who are disengaged from learning and achievement, despite the very best efforts of their teachers.

For many years we have provided our students and parents with detailed learning profile reports twice a year, which clearly explain what students know, and can do, and what they need to do in order to demonstrate improvement and move to the next level of achievement. We allocate grades A to E for each subject as part of a program of school-based assessment in the second semester of year 10, only when it is appropriate to do so for the awarding of the School Certificate,

which is an exit credential for a small number of year 10 students. We do not allocate grades in years 7, 8 and 9 or in the first semester of year 10. In the 13 years that I have been principal at the school, no parent has ever asked me to allocate single letter grades.

Of the 1050 girls in our public, comprehensive high school in the inner west, we have at least 60 who really struggle to learn and cope with the demands of the year 7 to 10 curriculum. They are not special education students who might attract integration funding and therefore would be exempt from the Federal Government's new legislation regarding the allocation of grades A to E. Let's not be fooled by the education bureaucrats and political spin doctors who defend all of this by saying that the grades label only the *work* produced by the students, and not the *students* themselves. Who are they kidding?

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Whether we like it not, the students who struggle to learn will be labelled as failures and can look forward to 76 grade Es over their four years of junior high school, as a consequence of this politically imposed, educationally indefensible, grading regime.

Consider the following scenario:

A below-average student with a chronological age of 13 in year 7 and a reading age of around 8 or 9 years could expect to be labelled with the E grade ('limited' or 'elementary' or 'with help can demonstrate the following') 20 times in her first year of high school (10 grade Es for the half yearly and 10 for the yearly reports).

These are the descriptors for grade E in the NSW Board of Studies literature for guiding teachers in the allocation of the grades. The descriptors for grade A include 'extensive knowledge' and 'very high level of competence'. The struggling student could then back up for 20 more grade Es in year 8, followed by 18 in year 9 and a further 18 in year 10. Over her four years in junior secondary school, she could share 76 grade Es with her parents and family members, but only if she kept attending school in the meantime.

Most students throughout NSW study nine or ten subjects in years 7 and 8 (stage 4), while students in years 9 and 10 (stage 5) study eight or nine subjects, depending on whether the school offers two or three electives for the School Certificate. The ten subjects in year 7 or 8 would be:

English, Maths, Science, History, Geography, Visual Arts, Design and Technology, Music, PD, H.PE, and Language Other than English

Some obvious questions

1. Will the retention rate for lower ability students decline as they are locked into a destructive cycle of labels of failure? If so, how does this help Australia as a nation? How does it generate a positive learning climate for at-risk students who are already alienated by schools and systems?
2. What is the professional judgement of a teacher worth in years 7 to 10, when junior high school students are years away from seeking university entrance in their final year of high school?
3. Are teachers so hopeless that they need the Federal Government to determine this precise level of detail in assessment and reporting regimes?
4. How will these students engage in the learning process? Why would they want to come to school every day and do their best?

5. Are parents really demanding these A to E grades across Australia? Is it just the usual political rhetoric to justify a very political hands-on approach by the Federal Government, using stand-over tactics to demand compliance from the States in return for federal funding? Where is it all coming from? Where is the so-called clamouring, and where is groundswell of parents making such demands?
6. Why is there such confusion across Australia as different States interpret the demands differently? How has the Federal Minister assisted the process by indicating that parents can reject the grade system if they so choose?
7. If States are interpreting the descriptions of the grades differently, then what is the point of the federal legislation?
8. Why is the wording of the federal guidelines more flexible than those of the NSW Government? If the Federal Government has indicated that the grades A to E or their equivalent are acceptable, then why has the NSW Government mandated A to E for years 1 to 10 (but for only English and Maths in years 1 and 2)?
9. Why do we have to have primary and secondary schools using the same reporting grid and the same descriptors, when the learning programs really are quite different?
10. How will this reporting regime further exacerbate the gulf between public selective schools (where most students will be allocated only grades A and B) and the public comprehensive high schools, where most students who find learning difficult are likely to be found?
11. Will the grading regime offer new insights into the results by postcode phenomenon if the publicly funded private schools, especially those in leafy, wealthy suburbs, allocate lots of As and Bs?
12. Do politicians and bureaucrats without any teaching background have any understanding of the complex inter-relationship between effective teaching and learning and quality assessment and reporting?
13. How will this regime encourage Aboriginal students to engage in the learning process?

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funding, broadly under the umbrella of accountability, social obligation and fiscal resourcing. The interface of Commonwealth and state government policy continues to create great chasms in the establishment of education direction and clouds the establishment of sound educational priorities. Varying perceptions and beliefs of 'What type of school system?' and, consequently, 'What type of future society do we want for this country?' should underpin the debate and inform drivers of policy.

The recently launched publication, *Making Federalism Work for Schools: Due Process, Transparency, Informed Consent*, by Dr Lyndsay Connors, (as commissioned by the NSW Public Education Alliance) profiles a dysfunctional interplay between the constitutional responsibility of the States in policy development and the growing and significant influence of the Commonwealth.

The NSW Secondary Principals Council, in partnership with the NSW Primary Principals Association, is working through extensive theory and action-based research and subsequent consultation with our full membership. Draft position papers, research-based projects and work with our lobbyist continue with strategic rigour, contributing to informed discussion. Draft positions (a result of our Sustaining Quality Schools Project) encompass dimensions such as enrolment and zoning; the viability of schools; local selection of staff; transition points, specialist schools and subsequent recommendations. At a state level, public secondary schools are immersed in consideration and the imposition of newly announced initiatives, including trade school constructs. This falls squarely into the targets of the State's plan. The diversity of State-supported initiatives, as announced via the state election, is beginning to emerge as either establishment or recurrently funded projects. The Budget provides strategic time frames over the next four years. Focus programs include:

- The Best Start (Literacy)
- Connected Classrooms
- School Sport
- Transition to Year 7
- Support for Beginning Teachers
- Training our Workforce
- Learn or Earn.

Further, the largest public education and training capital works program ever undertaken in New South Wales has been announced. This encompasses the Government's newly established 'Building Better Schools' initiative.

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THE centralised manifestation of policy continues to embrace the educational agenda as the federal election looms closer.



Discourse and rigorous debate surround potent dimensions, demanding a critique. Professional associations, unions, peak bodies, educational forums and networks, educators, academics and the education departments of various sectors focus discussion on the merits and possibility (if at all) of modes of authentic delivery. The issues primarily are performance pay, national curriculum (framework) and

Mirror neurons: The key to learning?

JOHN FREW and MARCIA VALLANCE describe research which suggests that children are born with different allocations of mirror neurons, hence different potential to learn and socialise.

AT the University of Parma, in 1996, a group of neuroscientists was busily mapping the neural pathways associated with hand movement in Macaque monkeys. The team of Rizzolatta, Gallese and Fogassi (1996) uncovered what is potentially the most significant neurological component in human behaviour, including learning, and may be as powerful for our understanding of these as the discovery of DNA was for understanding genetics (Ramachandra, 2000). The discovery was made by accident. Fogassi returned to the laboratory and casually picked up a raisin from an experimental bowl. The Macaque monkey, which was still wired to electrodes used in the planned experiment, displayed neural activity as if it was reaching for the raisin. Yet the monkey had not moved.

After replicating the experiment several times, it was obvious that something new and significant had accidentally been uncovered. In a series of papers following this discovery, these neurons became known as mirror neurons. Subsequent research is progressively validating their significance. They were soon shown to be present in most primates. In humans, they are particularly more abundant and complicated.

In 2005, Iacoboni described two types of motor neurons. One which responds to observed actions and another type that fires in response to the perceived purpose of that action. Iacoboni had volunteers watch films of people reaching for various objects in a dinner setting (teapot, cup, jug, plate of pastries, napkins) in different contexts. In every instance, a basic set of reaching neurons fired. But different additional sets of mirror neurons

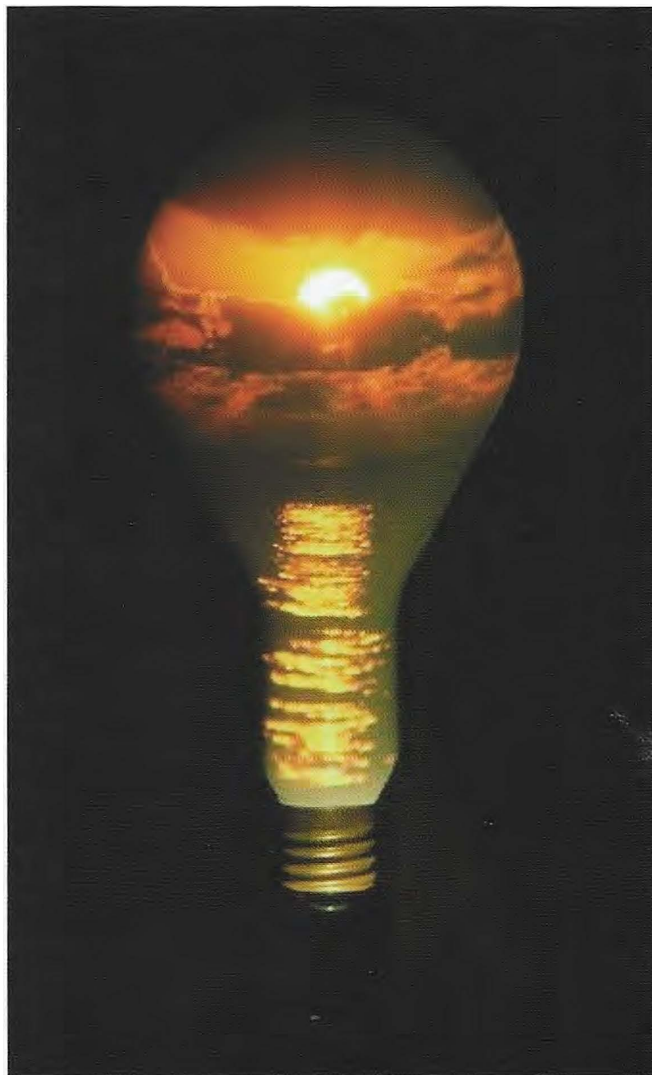
would also fire, depending on what expected action was suggested by the setting. For example, neatly set tables prepared for tea, compared to a setting looking as tea had been finished, produced different results. In the first instance, the viewer expected the hand to pick up a tea cup to drink, and one set fired. However, if the viewer expected the hand to pick up a cup to clean it, another set fired. The purpose interpreted came from the arrangement of the objects, so consequent responses were different.

Perception of intention

Taking this example further, think of the importance of being able to tell, by the way someone handles a rock, whether they are going to throw it or just study it. Decisions made at this

point have real safety implications and, in evolutionary terms, mirror neurons provide a decided advantage. The importance is in the perception of the intention of the action, thus allowing advantageous responses.

The associated firing of mirror neurons, to a perceived direction of behaviour, provides a powerful clue as to how children learn the social and cultural information



that allows them to successfully integrate into their community. Children are born with the necessary body building and survival mechanisms in their brain. Things like gender, breathing, sleeping, and so on, are automatic. However, social behaviours must be learned. In a basic form, people need to be able to move to maximise their physical satisfaction. They plan what they want, understand how to get it and what to expect when their actions are complete. That is, by watching others, they 'practise' the action and anticipate the outcome. This is the domain of mirror neurons.

Theories of mind

Philosophers have long been concerned with the mind. That is, the dichotomy between the mind and the brain. Where does consciousness reside? How do we understand others and understand they have a mind like ours? The discovery of mirror neurons has provided a vital clue that helps us to more clearly understand how a mind develops.

Initially, it was believed that children collected evidence in the form of gestures and expressions. With this, they developed an understanding of another's mental state and therefore learned to predict outcomes of behaviour. This is the 'Theory – Theory' model, which Gallese refers to as the Vulcan Approach (with reference to Dr Spock, of *Star Trek*). Spock is portrayed as a non-emotional type of being who relies completely on logical decision-making.

The other popular supposition is referred to as the 'Stimulation Theory'. This suggests that humans are natural mind readers. We can place ourselves into 'another's shoes'; we can create an internal representation of their actions, sensations, emotions, and so on. It becomes 'as if' we are experiencing the same feelings as the person we observe. Mirror neurons provide the explanation for this theory of learning. It is the mirror neurons that allow the brain to 'replicate' the observed sequence of movement, the emotional content of the action and, most importantly, predict the purpose of that action. Mirror neurons allow for a perfect learning system (Slyvester, 2002).

Learning and language

As pointed out, humans, like all social animals require a system that allows a group to understand the intentions of another's actions, signals, and so on. Through this recognition, they can perform their own actions that match that initial action. It is the ability to understand, not only the action but also the *intention* of that action that is the building block for all social behaviour. Mirror neurons allow this to happen.

Arbib claims that language has developed from simple gestures, a type of proto-language. From this scaffold of rudimentary pantomime, a verbal proto-language evolved that was progressively refined until a fully functional language emerged. This theory, although not without some critics, strengthens the case for the presence of mirror neurons.

More supporting evidence of the significance of mirror neurons emerged when Gallese and Rizzolatti (2005) found that, when people listen to sentences describing actions, the same motor neurons fire, as would have had the subject performed the action themselves or witnessed them being performed. The cells responded to an abstract representation that described a visual or visceral state.

Mirror neurons and learning

When teaching, it is through language and demonstration that information is transferred from the teacher to the student. The various styles of learning (visual, kinetic, auditory, and so on) presented by the teacher not only cognitively engage the student but the presence of mirror neurons allow the student to gain access to the intention of the lesson. This combination of empathetic understanding and behavioural intention combine in a way that it is almost as if the student performed the action for him or herself.

As a student's understanding improves, he or she can recognise more subtle, complex ingredients of the teacher's message. If, for instance, a person is proficient in a certain area, say dance, they will pull together more information about another's dance. This accounts for the pleasure that knowledgeable people experience when watching a virtuoso's performance, compared to someone who has no base expertise in that area. If you observe a 'master class' given to already proficient students, the teacher's ability to make subtle but significant changes is inspiring. This is because both have mature models of the actions and are aware of things the rest of us don't see.

The foundations of empathy

The peculiarity of mirror neurons that allows us to equate the processes of our mind with another's goes beyond motor action. As Iacoboni asserts, '*we do not have to pretend, we are the other person's mind*'. We experience not only their motives, we experience their emotions. This underpins empathy, which is the ability to internalise the emotional state of others by simply observing their facial expressions and body language (Dobbs, 2006).

In fact, emotions can be readily absorbed from a third party source, such as television, film, books, and so on. This characteristic has implications for youth observing violence and pornography. In both cases, it may be more than just the visual sense that is experienced. If this is true, voyeurs will have a similar reaction as would occur if they actually participated in the scene. This has significant social implications in relation to the easy access that young people have to these experiences.

Autism and Asperger's Syndrome

A student disability faced by many teachers is autism, and its less profound form, Asperger's Syndrome. Such children suffer in the social sense. Their inability to infer the thoughts or the behaviours of others, and the loss of their ability to predict, accounts for their own appropriate action. Autistic children appear to be trapped in their own world, unable to make personal connections with others. They are more interested and comfortable with 'things' than people. In other words, they lack empathy.

For years, the cause of autism has been poorly understood. However, since mirror neurons have been identified, a real, observable cause of this disability is at hand. Children with autism have very few mirror neurons, hence they have little or no ability to learn social skills and language as effortlessly as the majority of others. Since Asperger's Syndrome is on a continuum down from autism, it seems logical that children are born with different allocations of mirror neurons, hence different potential to learn. It may well be that some students have an excessive number of these neurons and may become inappropriately overwhelmed with the emotions they observe in others. So much is still not understood but the relationship between mirror neurons and autism provides a powerful clue in understanding this disability.

Teaching implications

Environment. The predictive characteristic of mirror neurons provides an even more valid reason about the importance of the classroom's physical environment. The lesson from the experiment involving the serving of tea is that the arrangement of the physical environment predicted the intended use of the room. The intention to clean up or to consume the tea was inferred from the scene presented. Teachers should understand that a classroom is either set up for learning or, if untidy, dirty and non-appealing, it is set up with no serious purpose. Students will make that prediction unconsciously and that judgment will affect the whole tone of the lesson.

Relationships. As seen, students can not only read the intentions of others but their emotions, as well. At school they are able to do this by observing facial expressions, tone of voice and other body language, particularly those of the teacher. This is because their mirror neurons fire up when we see the expression in others.

This has real implications for teachers. All have experienced the class that challenged us beyond what could be reasonably expected. When confronting that class, the first visual contact between teacher and students is vital. As professionals, it is our duty to send a message that indicates the ensuing time will be positive and rewarding. Allow them to 'predict' this through your body language and tone of voice, as well as the actual words you use. If you sigh, frown and appear despondent, you have already lost their cooperation for that lesson. You have mirror neurons; they have mirror neurons: use them in a professional way. Smile and the world smiles with you!

Modelling. The effectiveness of teaching that depends on modelling/mimicking is explained by mirror neurons. The mastery of complex motor skills involves a process of preliminary motor neuron simulation, priming, programming and rehearsing (Sylwester, 2007). It's the stimulation of mirror neurons that facilitates this process. The students perform the task in their head before they attempt it in real space. The better the demonstration observed, the more successful the reproduction. Teachers should take care to get this right.

'Professional athletes and coaches, who often use mental practice and imagery, have long exploited the brain's mirror neurons, perhaps without knowing their biological basis', says Dr Iacoboni. Observation directly improves muscle performance. Mirror neurons make this connection much more than a cognitive observation; it is more real.

Mirror neurons also explain the enjoyment people experience when observing elite athletes, dancers, and so on. We mentally represent actions as we watch, even though we are unable to physically mimic them in real space.

On the other hand, children who lack the opportunity to observe a model of a motor driven skill, in the preferred developmental period, have difficulty recovering from this deprivation. It seems that, like any neural development, the formation and strengthening of mirror neurons not only depends on an appropriate stimulus but, as often happens, there is a defined time when the pres-

ence of myelin facilitates that neural formation. Further, a lack of stimulus over time results in the materials required for neural connections to be pruned, that is, discarded from the appropriate site to allow for more efficient neural development in other areas.

Conclusion

An investigation around the existence and function of mirror neurons is in its infancy yet the potential impact of this research, for educators, is enormous. The theory proposed gives a biological explanation for practices that successful teachers instinctively understand.

Successful teachers understand the importance of strong, positive relationships with their students. The transfer of this is through mirror neurons. Preservice teacher training, and ongoing teacher training now has scientific confirmation that positive relationships work. Hard-line protagonists who support the belief that any soft approach ruins students will find very little scientific support for their views, especially the 'spare the rod and spoil the child' belief that gains currency when teaching is difficult.

Understanding the deficit of mirror neurons in autistic children, and the variable distribution, through Asperger's Syndrome, on to 'normal', should reduce the frustrations that teachers face when confronted with these children. It is easy to forgive the mistakes of a child with visual deficits. The teacher should be just as forgiving for mistakes children make in their interpretation of the intentions of others. Because the 'mistakes' of autistic kids are often un-likeable, a more professional response is required from the teacher.

Teachers have long realised the benefit of demonstrating new skills. The properties attached to mirror neurons confirm why demonstrations work and why the quality of the demonstration is significant. Coupled with mental rehearsal, this is an area that has the potential for productive research.

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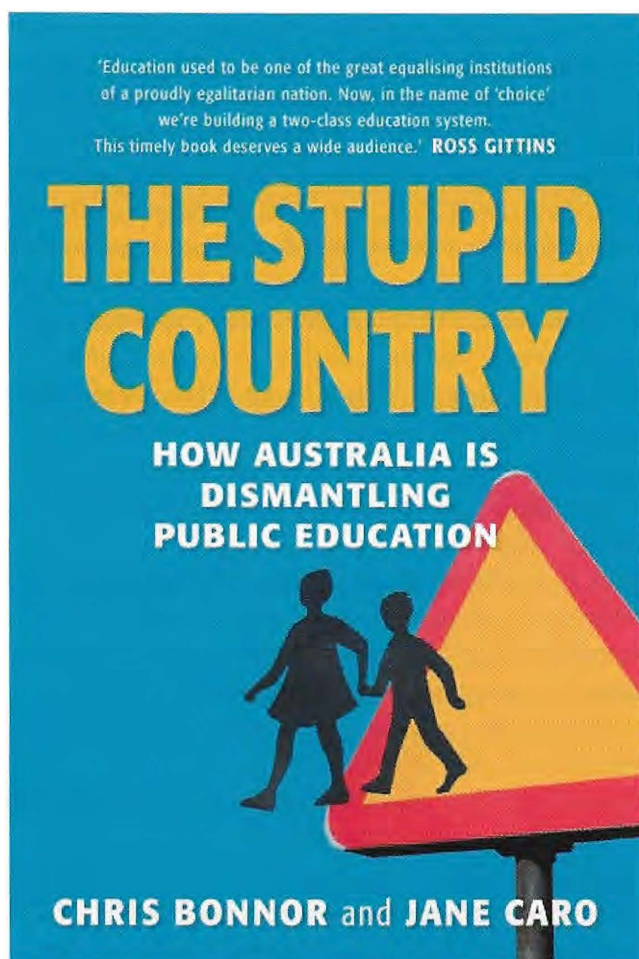
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'The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education'

Chris Bonnor and Jane Caro

University of New South Wales Press Ltd: 2007

CHRIS Bonnor recently served as president of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council, and has been Principal of Davidson High School and, previous to that, Asquith Boys High School. Jane Caro was the Convener of Priority Public and is the parent of two children educated in public schools. She is an experienced and well-known writer, broadcaster and communicator. The authors have grappled with the issues and perspectives in the public-private school debate and presented chapters in a logical sequence.

The book argues that private schooling in Australia has been funded in a way that guarantees that public education is being progressively marginalised, and effectively dismantled. The authors develop their argument without relying on the tired language of the public-private school debates. They freely admit to mistakes that public educators have made and don't throw the blame on those who have chosen private schooling. But what they keep coming back to is this: what we have set up isn't sustainable and is already having long-term consequences. We continue down

this pathway at considerable peril, not only for equity and social harmony but also for economic success and national growth.

Highlights

The chapter on 'Anxiety and Choice' explores the whole family and social changes that have driven private school growth: growing affluence, parental anxiety and the culture of choice (along with its limits). Principals will especially relate to chapters 3, 4 and 5 on the language of crisis and the myths and realities of schooling. The authors use Australia-wide examples to unpack the crisis creation about schools in general, and about public schools, in particular. They then address all the commonly held myths about schooling and especially about comparing schools. They especially give a serve to much of the nonsense of what passes for school reform. This is followed by a chapter that tests the claims for private schooling against the reality of what it may be actually delivering. Some of the claims in this chapter are profoundly disturbing.

No book about public and private schooling is complete without some attempt to relate how private schools are funded. The authors take a different approach by prefacing any discussion of dollars and cents with an analysis of the popular case for funding. They also present suggestions made by various players about greater public-private convergence and sharing. One quote highlights the importance of public schools to democracy building. *"Public education has played a very important role in helping to build the social capital and the social bridging that keeps our societies and communities together, and create a stable and prosperous democracy. Right from the outset, Sir Henry Parkes envisaged Australian public schools as making "no distinction of faith, asking no question about where a child was born, what may be his condition of life or what the position of his parents, but inviting all to sit side by side".*

Throughout the book, Bonnor and Caro hint of solutions that recognise both public and private schooling. The solutions they develop in their final chapter acknowledge, and draw on, the work of others. Of course, these solutions won't satisfy all players because no one can pretend that there won't be 'losers' in any change. What is refreshing is the authors' focus on the need for children to have at least equivalent access to opportunities for learning and achievement.

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Australian Principals' Update

NSW

Lila Mularczyk

ELECTION, election, election! As I write this report, the federal election announcement is pending. We don't, however, have a clear vision as to the focus, priorities and differentiated policy paths of either of the primary adversarial parties. Government secondary principals at a state and federal professional association level have clearly articulated priorities. These are identified needs to enhance both the viability and community profile of public education schools within the broader context of our interdependent education systems.

The Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA), as a peak body, has underpinned the needs, nationally, of public secondary schools in the following extract:

- a consistent and comprehensive approach to improving the intellectual, physical and mental health of all young Australians
- a national curriculum framework for all Australian schools
- adequate supply, training and wellbeing of our teachers and school leaders
- school buildings, infrastructure, environs and management practices that are environmentally sustainable
- a national ICT framework for schools.

The 2007 ASPA conference was convened in early October, in partnership with APPA (Australian Primary Principals Association). The conference was attended by delegates from across Australia, including NSWSPC representatives from the executive and membership. Apart from the professional learning based on the conference theme, it was evident from discussions with other participants that government school leaders are concerned that public opinion so often seems to dictate education policy, which is then implemented without proper consideration. Often, this produces federal and state policy decisions that are in conflict with each other.

The NSW Secondary Principals Council agrees with the broad parameters of, and in principle, the ASPA priorities. At a local level, our Sustaining Quality Schools Project activity is currently embracing rigorous discourse with our federal members, explicitly on policy development, public opinion, our position papers (conjointly developed with the NSW Primary Principals Association) and recently imposed federal policies. This discourse involves secondary (NSWSPC members) and primary principals (NSWPPA members) engaging federal members in conversation and sharing literature on this topic. *The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education* is a book that is generating discussion on reforms that will support the ideals of public education. Further, the NSWSPC has maintained employment of a lobbyist, in the lead-up to the election. Our principals' council continues to provide opportunities for members to productively contribute to approaches, discourse and debate around a national curriculum framework, national testing, with summer schools and leadership standards as examples.

This is further complemented by a comprehensive and extensive Professional Learning Program at the state level. The annual NSWSPC conference and professional learning days and programs, as provided through the NSW Leadership Alliance, are exceptionally highly evaluated, meeting the immediate and long-term various needs of principal colleagues at any point along their career continuum.

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Ignoring elephants and paying the price

After reviewing a decade of so-called 'reforms', CHRIS BONNOR concludes that policy-makers across Australia have avoided tackling the 'elephants' head-on – i.e. the major causes of educational inequality – and have simply provided a look-alike series of new fancy-titled programs that skirt around potential societal conflict and have little real impact.

I HAVE been looking at trends in schools around the Australian States and Territories as part of a book I am writing on public/private schooling in Australia. What better source to consult than the regular state reports published in *Principal Matters*?

The reports are provided by the principals' organisation in each jurisdiction. They amount to an alarmingly accurate account of the way the States have managed and mismanaged public education in almost a decade of challenge and upheaval. The reports are alarming because they strip away the cant and hyperbole that oozes from state education bureaucracies. They are accurate because they are written by school principals,

who are arguably the most informed commentators on education, combining a micro-understanding of their schools with a macro-view of the wider frameworks of schooling.

While this article is just a sketch, there are many themes which have recurred in these reports since the late 1990s. Certainly, the theme of 'reforming' schools and systems is dominant. The drive to reform schools has come from many quarters. The older hands can remember the forced grafting of marketplace priorities and culture onto schools and schooling, going back to the late 1980s. It didn't fit, and still doesn't, but it created two decades of turmoil that was arguably part of the plan.

Along with changes in the funding of schools, the market philosophy gave a boost to the schools that were most advantaged by location (in desirable areas), the exercise of choice (of students by schools, not the reverse) and by the flexibility of their management.

State education systems have been forced to come to terms with the shifting of education from being a communal good to becoming a private and positional good. The rigid state bureaucracies, and arguably the stakeholder groups (yes, including principals), were slow to come to grips with the privatisation of schooling in Australia. When the penny did drop, the need to reform state systems was additionally driven by the need to compete (albeit in a corrupted marketplace), the need to restructure to cut costs (in the face of falling enrolments) and the political need to claim that, whatever was wrong, it was going to get better.

Serial 'rebirthing'

As a consequence, this period has seen state education systems born again, and again, and again. In much less than a decade, Queensland has confronted *The Next Decade* followed by *Destination 2010*. Victoria's *Schools of the Third Millennium* was followed by *Public Education – the Next Decade* and then *Blueprint for Education*. The ACT saw *High Schools of the New Millennium* and then, after the millennium came and went, they have *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools*. South Australia's contributions include *Partnerships 21*, *Key Deliverables*, and so it goes on. Such common themes might be the most visible outcome of the frenzy of swapping education bureaucrats between the States. Some might call this cross-fertilisation; others might continue in the same vein, albeit with less tact.

In one way or another, the future also received a pounding. NSW probably won the Orwellian prize for its brilliant *Building the Future*, which was all about closing schools. Competing for the prize would be the more recent *Choice, Diversity, Opportunity* in the ACT which, you guessed it, is all about closing schools. Anything that included ICT was elevated to the height of hype. We all rolled out computers over this time, usually in the following order: the roll-out and the political kudos, followed by technical support, followed by some vague notion of what to do with the computers, with respectable bandwidth bringing up the rear. Some ICT plans were stand-alone; others part of some grander scheme.

Forget about flag poles, common reporting and common curriculum, it all represents a solid case for common national standards of hype. Someone should tell DEST and Minister Bishop, but, like her predecessors, she is busy enough bashing schools about history, Maoists, and exercising a breathtaking level of micro-manage-

ment. The enthusiasm of the Australian Government for accountability comes as the States seemingly try to outdo each other in testing, student and school reporting, teaching registration and standards, and more. It makes you wonder why we had the nerve to call ourselves professionals two decades ago.

Over these same years, public schools were hit by parallel media-manufactured crises. The alleged size of school bank accounts was aired across the nation (including ACT, Victoria, NSW and WA). After all, the role of the state bureaucracies is to faithfully gather public school data of all types, aggregate it and feed it, under FOI, to lazy journalists. NSW schools were ranked against each other on just about everything: retention, results, money, violence in schools, suspensions, and much more. Of course, FOI doesn't apply to government-funded private schools but the occasional bullying episode or excursion frolics ensured that they didn't miss the media frenzy.

This period has seen state education systems born again, and again, and again.

Over this period, the States have been scrambling for funds to keep the system afloat. Some found it harder than others to close schools, which as we know is the permanent way to save funds. We all know about Kennett's mayhem in Victoria, but WA soon followed (in Perth), then SA, ACT, Qld, and the others, as well. NSW might be next for the chop, but the premier State prefers to feed the demands from Treasury by butchering the bureaucracy. (While on that matter, remember the days when government departments made requests to Treasury?).

Meanwhile, the fiscal constraints have seen most States working up an enthusiasm for Public-Private Partnerships and now these PPPs are part of our vocabulary. Supposed benefits aside, the competition for funds also hasn't been helped by the success of the unions, in most of the States, with serial demands for ever-decreasing class sizes.

Impact of baby shortage

Despite mini-baby booms, the States have also responded to decreasing student numbers (they are not making any more babies out there) by creating networks of schools (Victoria 2000), or collegiates (NSW). Some States have taken on a big middle schooling agenda (NSW), while others (NT 2006) are reconfiguring their system to create middle schools. They should have a yarn to the New Zealanders, who are coming back from a similar journey.

We all know that, in public education, we are living off an investment largely made decades ago. Most States have managed to avoid a massive rebuild of schools, but time is running out. What politicians have managed to do is make a very big noise whenever they spend any money on the crumbling infrastructure of state schools. The greater the crumbling, the louder the noise. Joshua did all this in reverse at Jericho some time ago.

The move to local management of schools over this time could fill a book and indeed, its advocates have written several and there have been excellent articles in *Principal Matters*. Most of the significant state plans have included elements of school-based management. Some of this has waxed and waned, for example, with changes of government (in Victoria a few years ago) but most of the States have fallen, with NSW following at its usual glacial pace. It has usually focused on staffing (for example, South Australia) but also on budgets, accompanied by assurances that schools will be better off as a consequence. This didn't stop school financial problems reoccurring (for example, Victoria 2004).

Increase in principal welfare problems

Despite (or maybe because of) school-based management, the States were reporting a measurable growth of principal welfare problems, especially over the last half dozen years. An ASPA survey found the least principal welfare problems in NSW; maybe there is comfort in being the last Stalinist education system in the world (just kidding)! The States tackled these problems in different ways. Queensland and NSW persuaded their governments to fund welfare provision for principals but the NSW plan was a victim of yet another restructure. Meanwhile, as we all know, the pool of applicants for principals' positions is looking increasingly like Adelaide's water supply, a comment on quantity and not quality, of course.

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The sources of pressure on school principals may also be reflecting the increasing marginalisation of many (mainly public) schools and their communities. The last eight years or so have seen many new policies for students with challenging behaviours, including Tasmania (2001), the new Act in Queensland and legislation

in NSW and Victoria to address the problem of violent students. In some cases, schools and systems have been pressured to divert funds from other programs into student welfare. All the States have established special programs (for example, Queensland) through to full-service provision (South Australia) to meet the needs of the disproportionate number of difficult students in public schools. Some have special programs (*Safe Schools*, NT) to target violence in schools. NSW has established schools 'underneath' its mainstream system, to handle students who have been suspended or who display challenging behaviour. Our framework of schools is so regressively stratified already, what does yet another layer matter!

Avoiding the important issues

There are times when you simply have to ask: what have been the benefits of all this substantial investment of energy and generation of hype. The most important issue facing Australian schools and school systems is the provision of at least comparable opportunities for all our young people. Despite all the events of a decade, I cannot be convinced that this has been achieved. What the state governments and bureaucracies have in common is their steadfast disinclination to deal with the important issues. I am reminded of this quote from Tom Bentley:

'... the effort to improve education outcomes has usually focused on finding levers and incentives to improve the effectiveness of schools themselves. This is a worthwhile goal. But it has tended to screen out a set of factors, which are far more influential on education outcomes, perhaps because of an implicit assumption that they cannot be controlled. They include private/public mix, social geography, social class and mobility, income and wealth differentials, culture and community involvement'.

Bentley, Tom et al., *A fair go: public value and diversity in education*, Demos Report, May 2004.

If we want genuine reform that provides equal educational opportunity for all our young people, we will have to be honest enough to 'see the elephants in the room', and then, brave enough to chase them out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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