

# A management malaise in education?

**John Frew**

Hardly a day goes by without some politician, commentator or academic decrying the decline in the standard of the modern education system. I agree that things have become a great deal worse in recent years BUT I do not place the blame on those easy targets – the teachers or the students. I will happily argue the case that teachers and students have improved, as has every other human endeavour. To illustrate this point, I have just come back from the golf course, a venue where modern young players with their healthier nutrition, improved coaching and better technology are playing at a level we could have only dreamed of years ago. This sort of progress can be seen in every field.

Before you start talking about any fall in academic standards, have a look at the extraordinary research being produced by our best PhD students or just admire the grasp our youth has on complex technology. The use of comparative university results is flawed unless you compare the top 5% of today's entrants with past results. In the 'good old days' most school leavers did not go to university, and this included most teachers. They went to college. And, if you think they were more responsible in their day then just sit around and listen to some of our older colleagues compare stories that reflect a serious but understandable lack of commitment! We were doing what most late teens always do, exploring new independence and sampling life as an adult.

So, just what do I think has got 'a whole lot worse'? I have for years decried the advent of the belief that all fields of endeavour can be led by specialist 'managers'. In fact, I have always referred to the Harvard Master of Business Studies, the famous MBA, as a modern virus that has infected all areas of the public service. I will try to articulate my reasons for this belief.

In the late sixties many of the humanity subjects like Psychology, Economics and Sociology felt a sense of rejection by those celebrated and arrogant Mathematics and Science subjects.

To counter this fear of inadequacy, these specialties started to apply the 'scientific approach' to their fields. The first element in this approach is the technique of reductionism, i.e. reducing everything down to its basic parts. Another element is the use of quantifiable data, i.e. if it can't be measured then it's not worth considering, implying real phenomena such as emotions and fear have no relevance to any human pursuit! In education, where students and teachers are an essential ingredient, this approach is flawed.

I'll start by scrutinising the faulty belief about exclusive reliance on quantifiable data. Any measurement can only take place in reference to experience, i.e. even in the highest level of Physics it is accepted that we cannot comprehend anything that is beyond our level of understanding. What this means is that the observer is restrained to what they know to measure and this therefore limits their understanding to the confines of their knowledge.

Now let's apply this understanding about this information to the experience that leaders in modern education possess! In recent years, Ministers both state and federal who have taken a proactive role in setting the education agenda often do so with no more experience than that they once attended school! Although it must be recognised that in NSW there has been an increasing tendency of State Ministers (at least going back to Adrian Piccoli) to actively seek advice from professional associations such as the NSWSPC, many politicians believe things like NAPLAN, changing the leaving age, financing private schools, providing choice for parents, facilitating this choice through the My School website and forcing teachers to prove they work by creating substantial hoops for them to jump through will all make a huge difference.

Then we have the bureaucrats who are the ‘masters’ of business administration yet often possess no more experience as teachers than their real masters, the politicians. Currently only one of the top executives in our State’s Department of Education has a history in the field of education. To compound this problem, bureaucrats who want to keep their jobs are only too happy to reassure the Minister that he/she is doing a good job, even if this is not the truth. They happily confirm they serve the Minister, but this then means they may not be effectively serving schools and children!

These leaders are not unwise or irresponsible. It is just the logic they use to construct the concepts they come out with. Their management templates etc are created by their experience. They have been unable to draw on any personal experience of real involvement in a school or more importantly in the classroom. Contrast this with the past when all the leading education leaders came from schools. The Minister took advice from them and acted as their representative when dealing with Cabinet and Treasury. The past models were based on lived experience.

Now look at the technique of reductionism, the hallmark of the ‘scientific method’. This is best illustrated by talking about the quest to find the fundamental unit of matter. Through the ages, scientists have continually divided the smallest existing particle into smaller parts. This has been done through the creation of better and better observation tools such as the CERN particle accelerator. The presumed theory is that if we know the parts we better understand the whole. That works when you examine classic Physics. A good analogy is a mechanical item. Say I take the carburettor from my car and take it to pieces. I can then put it back together again to return it to its original state (I must say, however, that when I have done this there have been often parts left over – but then I have never been ‘scientific’). However, we are biological entities and although Science can identify the foundation cells that make a person, the way these components think, act and react is particularly influenced by the environment in which they have been ‘assembled’.

In the modern Department of Education, and in many academic fields, the creation of any model they present develops in a specific bureaucratic or academic environment. I used to observe this phenomenon in action at the many conferences I had to attend. The papers presented invariably reflected the hypothetical or managerial fields in which they developed. In fact, for many conferences there is a call for papers that reinforce the ‘conference theme’. A compounding problem is that ambitious conference participants will adopt and enrich the current fashionable model to fast-track their careers – all in all these mutual admiration events result in a type of conference confirmation of the theory!

It has to be acknowledged that the emergent model is very likely to be effective for those members of the environment from which they emerged. That is, these models really do satisfy those members whose lived experience is in the halls of academia or head office. However, they are not effective in another environment, the one at the school, in the classroom.

When we examine an ‘educated mind’ and reduce it to its component parts, our focus on the fundamentals will bring us to numeracy and literacy. Therefore, it is argued, if we improve these we can rebuild the kids from a stronger base to become improved students, i.e. it becomes all about readin’, writin’ and ‘rithmetic!

From the outset the use of the NAPLAN test has been heavily criticised by the teaching profession and informed academics as being extremely limited in evaluation of learning. This is not the place to do a detailed analysis of the countless flaws in this test. The point is that many of our leaders just can’t understand that students are not only the sum of their parts but also a product of the environment in which they emerged. This brings us to our final point.

Emergence theory is at the forefront of biological understanding including the brain which, let’s face it, is a very important consideration for learning. Over the years schools and teaching practices have emerged to

satisfy the circumstances that existed at that time. Although not the 'perfect product' that could be anticipated if each component evolved to be the best solution in a perfect environment, when you consider the vast array of social, economic and cultural characteristics of each school, the current 'top-down' 'one-size-fits-all' approach fails to allow for local circumstances to be considered. If left to the process of emergence the ideal school for the upper North Shore would be vastly different to the one for Walgett, but each would be the 'best solution' for the children in their immediate environment.

The most recent scientific method to examine nature is 'complex systems theory'. This is an approach that focuses on the whole rather than the reduced parts, and it has shown that spontaneous network patterns emerge that are sensitive to and dependent on initial conditions. It has been shown that when humans are left to freely organise themselves they tend to produce spontaneous order. I would say the more we leave schools and districts to organise themselves within the boundaries of our extended community then surely, more effective approaches for teaching our students will emerge.

As a footnote, the study of emergent biological systems cites the ant colony as a primary example of emergence. The ants can only communicate with their near neighbour but when all these local interactions combine you are left with a complex, sophisticated organisation that can keep the temperature constant for the queen's pleasure. Another fact which might be relevant is that ants, despite being contained in different-shaped enclosures, remove their dead so as to be as far away from the entrance to the nest as possible. In educational terms, maybe 'ants' understand how important it is to get dead 'ideas' as far away from the classroom as possible!

#### **Contributor details**

John Frew (Phone 0429 572 081, Email [john.r.frew1@gmail.com](mailto:john.r.frew1@gmail.com) ) 9/9/19



John was the Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours and loves to travel!