The Ideal School

Notes for a

Talk to Geraldton High School

27th November, 1989

1. Introduction

To discuss the 'ideal school' almost assumes that as an academic, I should be in my element - an ivory tower discussion on ideals. There is, however, no such thing as an ideal school, and heaven help you if you get there; because heaven is where you be. But we can begin somewhere, aim appropriately and effectively, and assess whether you are in the right direction and exactly where you are now.

There are three critical elements in this discussion - aims, processes and inputs. All three are intrinsically interrelated and it is not possible to speak of ideals without an understanding on these three. Yet we must not forget that it is student outcomes that are paramount. In the past few years, rather than student outcomes, process has become paramount. We need to constantly regaled against this disease that is permeating our WA education system during the past two-three years. This disease is the virus of management. Schooling and learning have slipped out of recent discussions about Education in this state, and they are absent from serious enquiry in government based reports. Note, for example, the statement in the School Development Plan. "Principals are responsible for managing the development and implementation of school plans. They must articulate the Ministry's policy in the school and the community and then involve both these groups in the school development process. Once a plan exists it is the principal's job to make sure that everyone concerned understands the plan and is clear about his or her individual role in its implementation". They are to be the messengers. Why can not principals be involved in MANAGING EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS. This means a concentration on learning, student outcomes, and even, a little educating on the side.

In my ideal school, we need to re-introduce education into management. Management is a virus poisoning our system, much nonsense accompanies discussions on performance indicators, the stupidities of national curriculum are becoming well-known, and we have seen the sterility of school development plans. Those with management vision should be treated with danger unless their vision agrees with yours.

My point is that there is a vacuum in the provision of schooling in this state. The union has the industrial
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ground covered; the Ministry has the management, political, and maybe the policy ground; but who is responsible for, who is discussing, and who is taking over the EDUCATION issues. My aim is not to blame the Ministry as my point is that the opportunity to take this ground which is there for the taking -- take it. If you do not, my prediction for the next five years is that education will not grow and develop but we may be more efficient and certainly lean.

But how are we going to get the school based decision making group- to me that means the principal - to regain the lost ground and begin to fill the vacuum. I believe that today's program is one such way. To constantly ask where we are going, what are we aiming for, how will we know when we get there, and where are we now, are the critical questions.

2. Outcomes.

So let me get back on track and specify some outcomes. The aims, I believe are eight fold: cognitive, social, affective, willingness to learn, love of learning, control over learning, physical and caring/spiritual. The task of schooling is to provide the optimal conditions for enhancing such learning in students. The outcomes of schooling, assessed in terms of learning, are multifaceted and include achievement, attitudinal, physical, social, and moral learning as well as learning to learn, love of learning, and control of learning. The success of the schooling enterprise is dictated by these concerns. If the aim of schooling is as I have described, then the outcomes and ideals of schooling must be primarily assessed in terms of these outcomes -- student outcomes.

Obviously, I contend that the inputs, and processes will differ depending on which combination of outcomes a school or teacher wishes to maximize. It is just not possible to maximize all outcomes equally, and schools and teachers within their ideal school may disagree about the weighting - quite properly. I would rather that the decision of what to maximize is explicit and calculated rather than being left to chance and "we'll see what happens' at the end of the year. Teachers need to know the rules, as do students and parents.

Although I place student outcomes at the pinnacle of the ideal school, there are important considerations to be given to teachers. Given that we do not want wage slaves or work-to-rule mendicants then the state has a responsibility to ensure that the providers are not treated as wage slaves or work-to-rule mendicants. The providers must be allowed to be reflective, to be excellent, and to undertake the tasks they are to provide: enhancing achievement, attitudinal, physical, social, and moral learning as well as learning to learn and love of learning. Much of the present discussion is in terms of wage slaves, time on task, and how to get friends involved in the promotion game. This is not promising. I sincerely trust that we can overcome the ill-will that seems to have been generated by the recent strike to get learning back to its foremost position.

We had an educational system that appeared to be geared towards the maintaining the status quo -- at
least that is the rhetoric. We had a highly centralised system that had in-built checks and balances but, so it has been argued, there was little recognition of the power, influence and talent at the school level. The advocates of centralism typically argued that the advantages were: special interest groups had more sway; there was less active participation and interference by constituents; any one official was less knowledgeable as he/she had less personal experience with constituents and thus could be impartial; poorly informed consumers were poor regulators; and the funding and staffing resources could be formula based and thus there was a de-emphasis on personality politics.

These are the losers in the new system. In my ideal school you need to consider how you are going to allow for: special interest groups, such as special ed, gifted, aboriginals; more active participation and interferences by constituents; more knowledgeable participants, at least more knowledgeable about their rights and what they can do; and more personality politics as this is what typically replaces formula funding.

We now have Better Schools. This document should never be underestimated. Just re-read the time lines. The Ministry is on target and there is more to come. Never believe that the Ministry does not have the zeal to accomplish Better Schools; that is perhaps why they preach the new jargon of management, efficiency, and MBA. The process is more important than the product. Or we have the product, let's find the most efficient and painless way to implement it. This is not meant as a criticism of managerial systems, so long as there is opportunity to debate whether the goals are worth achieving.

An ideal school will need personnel that can implement the Ministry's wishes and still provide optimal learning conditions in light of the aims. The Ministry has the right to insist on its ways (even if they are not optimal) simply because the state mandates that schooling is compulsory and thus it has an obligation to provide what it regards as quality schooling. But you have the right to question, cajole, convince and cooperate (or not).

3. There is also an assumption in an ideal school to minimize variance in learning - make all students good at all the outcomes. Minimizing variance is important provided that the mean standards are appropriately high. At the same time, schools often want/need to maximize divergences, and minimize standardization. So, there is a need to decide what aims you wish to maximize before deciding or discussing how to maximize and/or minimize. Further, different students may maximize different aims and thus an ideal school needs to allow for this.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that there are no merits to tailoring instruction to individuals within the classroom, I still believe that teachers must be able to cater for individual differences. I have spent much research time ascertaining different processing styles and we have had much success with writing computer software to take these styles into account; as well as giving control to the students. My ideal school would cater for diversity, actually encourage diversity, and would aim to serve all comers. Success, however, is part of a cost-effectiveness model: an ideal school would be effective in making
this provision to diverse groups in a cost-effective manner.

Too often ideal schools are conceived in terms of more -- more money, more staff, more achievement excellence awards, more students, more time at school, more, more, more (with only one less - less students per class). I believe that this mentality has cost us much and is our undoing. The question is how can we maximize the achievement or whatever, by doing this rather than that. By introducing computers rather than more teachers; by having more homework marked than class time on problems? Making such choices are what we practice every day, and these need to be highlighted.

4. Then there are inputs. The inputs from within your school district are probably the greatest determinant of outcomes than anything you choose to do in the school. On my count, about 60% of the variance of subsequent achievement if a function of prior student achievement. In the UK, they have tried to account for differences between school outcomes by partialling out this initial difference in student catchment achievement. I wonder what is left when you partial out achievement - pretty hollow students.

It is tough to detail ideals without a better understanding of your inputs. Performance, by definition, is a function of relating inputs to outputs. It is false evaluation to only measure outputs. If you receive the best students and they are not that much better than your counterparts at the end of schooling, then you have failed, not succeeded. (I will return to this latter.)

5. Finally there are processes. Processes are correlates anmd there are many ways of achieving ideals. Short of moral impropriety, how a teacher achieves outcomes is almost immaterial. At least it is immaterial when assessing effectiveness but it may be more important for diagnostic or improvement considerations. If one teachers uses behavioural objectives and another does not, this is, and should be, unrelated to effectiveness. Further, another teacher could use behavioural objectives and be effective and another teacher use them and not be effective. The presence or otherwise of particular teaching behaviours is irrelevant to discussions of effective teaching.

But where there is ineffective teaching, discussions on strategies may prove useful provided that they are not prescriptive. My point is that an ideal school does not spend a lot of time standardizing teaching or searching for the most effective teaching methods and then insisting that they be implemented. Rather, my ideal school compares different teaching methods, assessing teacher-style interactions, and constantly assesses teacher behaviour by concentrating only on outcomes. It is up to the professionalism of the teacher to decide how to effect these outcomes. I would hope that my ideal school would allow for much opportunity for teachers to discuss teaching methods in a positive manner (e.g., by standard setting) and overcoming the perennial problems of teachers - they rarely discuss methods. Oh such a lonely profession.
My ideal school would have evaluations of outcomes and not processes as the focus. The present move to assess teachers on what strategies they use is the biggest barrier to effective teachers, teaching, student outcomes, and schools. Let us discuss the evaluation of outcomes not processes.

6. I realize that in this school you have decided to maximize achievement outcomes. My plea would be that you do not consider that you have succeeded in achieving ideals unless you consider scores on standardized achievement tests, and other factors.

There are various achievement related outcomes. Probably the most important is control over learning. When a student can self-regulate their behaviour, have a sense of control over learning, and are high in self-efficacy then we have a successful outcome from our schooling. I want to make a distinction between control of the process and control of the product. The control over processes used to achieve outcomes typically relates to a sense of predictability of process. In addition, there are known expected outcomes. That is, the individual with control expects a less aversive outcome than the individual without control, and there is also a desire to minimize the maximum danger to themselves (Miller, 1980).

I have suggested, in one of my research studies, that girls rather than boys have a sense that they are not so much in control when they confront computers. These non-users do not know how to minimize negative outcomes, are not as aware of how to reduce the aversive impact, do not know how to reduce stress, do not understand how to control the amount of exposure to the negative aspects of computers (such as error messages) and, at the same time, they believe that computers can adversely affect them. This notion is consistent with the developmental evidence in that girls learn about control, or relinquishing it, when they are in the early to middle adolescent period. Our society seems to influence young adolescent girls to believe that compliance, negotiation and non-risk taking are desirable attributes (males could learn these attributes profitably), the very attributes that are not needed when confronting a computer. The computer typically needs decisiveness, assertiveness, achievement striving and the imposition of will, at least how it is used in school. The Hattie and Fitzgerald (1987) study demonstrated that there were no differences in attitude towards computer between males and females during primary school, but the differences became marked as the students progressed through adolescence.

The sense of control proposed here is akin to Bandura's (1986) theory of self-efficacy. Those persons high in self-efficacy have the perceived ability to cope with aversive events, and because they believe they can minimize the effects of unpleasant events they have fewer reasons to be stressed or fear computers. Those who believe they are low in control or self-efficacy expect more aversive events (and that these events may be intermittent, seemingly without pattern) and thus they have higher levels of anxiety or arousal.

The Itinerant Children's project is firmly based on giving the students control over the computer. The purpose of the project is to provide for the particular needs of children aged from five to eight years of
itinerant families by preparing for their use special educational programs - using technology as the medium for delivery- which will offset disadvantages they may suffer in terms of academic achievement, self-esteem, or social adjustment. The software is written to give the students a sense of the product and how they can achieve immediate control over the process. The programs include much feedback, the process is predictable, the content is appropriate, and there evolves a sense that the student is in control of the learning. It must be noted that many of the teachers are itinerant and thus part of the success of the program may relate to giving the students more control over their learning and progress.

I would conjecture that the same principles apply to aboriginal children who are not as assertive or imposing of will. It is these attributes of aboriginals and girls that relate to the differences and not the gender or race per se. This model accounts for the reasons why people do or do not use computers, and not to the correlates - gender and race. They, at least, have different aims.

A further aspect of control of process indicates that students who learn the optimal conditions to implement various learning strategies are more likely to be successful in school achievement outcomes. Hattie and Hattie (1989) have demonstrated that successful students are very versatile in their study behaviors and a knowledge of this versatility is a better predictor of successful outcomes in secondary and tertiary studies than any other combination of study skills behaviors. Computer software packages typically introduce surface and factual knowledge as well as deep processing information. The student who is able to apply the most optimal strategy is more likely to learn more and enjoy using the computer. Versatile learners are successful learners.

7. **Performance indicators** lead to a different path.

The present call for performance indicators probably comes from the call that "all is not well", "back to the basics", "stop change as it is negative" summed up as the call for accountability. Obviously not all of us would agree that all is bad. It is probably correct, however, that the general public have less understanding of what happens in schools and why teachers are doing certain things, than ever before. The fear of the unknown is often related to a call for more accountability. This leads to two conclusions.

First, there must be a tension between this call and professional autonomy. We do not judge doctors by assessing their performance based on an average number of patients that they had treated successfully. In the medical professions it is clear the professional standards are monitored by the training that individuals receive and through the application of their professional knowledge to standards agreed by their own professional academies. But teachers differ in that they rarely have formalized ongoing as opposed to pre-service training, they do not have professional academies that maintain and assess standards, and in many ways doctors are publicly accountable in a free market. Never think that the doctors professional bodies are there just for professional standards - they are the most effective cartel and union of them all. However, each doctor is expected to come up to some standards, not just half of them as is implied by any notion of average levels of attainment of their pupils. Thus, I would see much
credence in relating performance indicators in teaching so some set of clear, definable, and accepted standards.

My ideal school will have appropriate, well conceived indicators of input, process and particularly outcome. School development plans that merely plan are useless and possible negative. As a consumer, I am not in the slightest interested in the plan to make this pencil, my concern is whether it performs. So too for schools.

8. Teaching and teachers

I have been into disastrous schools, and then noted the pivotal role that a new head teacher can have on that school. With no change in inputs, a successful principal can 'turn a school around'. Obviously, my ideal school would have an excellent principal. As indicated above, this person would be as concerned with educational and instructional leadership as he/she would be with management. Constantly asking questions about education, teaching, and student outcomes, and imploring better and better from staff, students and plant are the minimum.

Quality teachers are also a must. Teachers have taken a bashing recently and it must be extremely hard to maintain that standards of entry is poor when there is no requirement to continue learning to become a teachers after the initial 30 week course. I do not think many in the community would be satisfied with their level of doctors, dentists, or even electricians and motor mechanics, if it was claimed that they were sufficiently trained to have no need for any further formal education. No wonder the quality of teaching is perceived as poor.

We then offer one month conversion courses to convert primary teachers to secondary teachers; we advertise for teachers with the smell of chalkdust and no training in special education and then deem them special education teachers; we give no credit in the promotion stakes to those who attain further learning; we pay nothing extra when teachers improve their own learning; we do not finance training institutions more than 30 weeks to prepare teachers; we have a Minister who states that teachers should improve their content and not their delivery, we have a Ministry that allows time release and study leave if teachers undertake management courses but not teaching related courses; we have a Union that deplores the quality of the present teachers by claiming that the standard has dropped in the past ten years by highlighting trends in entry behaviours and not concentrating on teaching behaviours; we have devolution that fails to mention quality teaching. No wonder teaching is perceived as low quality.

We should be talking about formally accrediting teachers into teacher-hood. This should be done by the present practitioners -- the teachers and principals; not the managers or politicians. The standards of entry should be publicly accountable. Yes, I do fear that teaching could become a union cartel (as the Australian Medical Association), but this is a better problem to deal with than the present despair and running down of teachers by teachers' representatives. A better analogy is the West Australian Board of
Psychologists. A powerful group of psychologists who decide on who can call themselves themselves psychologists. They set the standards, they decide on the quality and type of supervision of new psychologists, they authorize and conduct research, they determine the professional ethics, the accredit professional development courses, advise on fees for services, and they licence psychologists and maintain who can remain as members.

I know what it is to attract excellent staff, but I also know the problem of retaining excellent staff. The moss rocks rarely want to leave their cosy familiar swamps. But the bright ones have options. We need strategies to keep them. I look at the reasons why teachers resign and become depressed at our present system that does not reward competence. The majority of teachers in Western Australia government schools leave by age 32 (when they reach the top of the first salary scale and probably see no chance for promotion, or little extrinsic or intrinsic rewards to continue up the scales); 40% moved to non-government schools; over 66% were on permanent tenure; 27% resigned because of the pressures of teaching on their health; 37% cited the effects of teaching on their family and social lives; 14% cited the link between promotion and seniority and a further 9% cited the necessity to move out of the class to get promotion; 18% cited classroom discipline. Now here's the rub: 47% stated that lack of support from the principal, superintendent or subject senior master was a major reason for their resignation; and particular emphasis was placed on the lack of support by the principal. Specifically, the lack of ability of the principal to make decisions, no involvement of teachers in decision making, lack of response to change by administrators, and a lack of support with discipline - and this was more strongly felt by male than female teachers.

You need to change your image - particularly within your schools. You are hamstrung in making decisions about policy, management and implementation; but you can make education decisions. You can foster learning and efforts to enhance learning.

My ideal school would have the power over hiring and firing. It would have the power to locate teachers that best fit the ethos, aims and identity of the school as it "should be".

9. **How do you know when you have an ideal school.**

The search for effective schools is based on the premise that when one is found it will be a model for others. Obviously, it can only be a model if the inputs are similar, and we have seen that this is unlikely., Further, effective schools rarely remain effective schools. This is for two reasons. First, education involves processes and not cut-moulds and thus the process is always mobile. I have argued that short-term innovation programs are more successful than long-term programs and thus if the momentum and 'right' programs are not constantly introduced then the effectiveness declines. The second reason is statistical. Whenever you choose a school at the extreme, such as an effective school, the probability of it getting better is much much less than the probability of it getting worse. There is always regression to the mean. (in the same way, that just looking at the A of fail grades is totally misleading and
inappropriate, special education kids much get better on average because they at the extremes.

Probably one of the most critical determinants of an effective schools is that it has processes in place to know that it is an effective school. Research, evaluation and criticism (positive and negative) are the hallmarks of an effective school. The constant endeavor to evaluate and improve.

This may mean that you have some school assessment programs in place. As, I am sure you are aware, there is an undue reliance on standardized testing in the USA. Every state has some mandated minimum competency tests in place. Cannell (1988) has recently exposed the dilemmas in using such procedures. He demonstrated that every state in the USA had an average achievement score higher than the national average -- an impossibility. As a consequence some jurisdictions are becoming more accomplished at sifting out better indicators. I note the moves by New York and California to emphasize progress rather than attainment. This avoids a major problem of accounting for the varying inputs.

There has been a recent move in the USA to evaluate schools using the value-added approach. This approach is based on the argument that quality is related to the school's ability to affect its students favourably, above and beyond the quality that the students bring to the school. In statistical jargon, it is the amount of variance remaining after the initial scores are partialled out -- and statisticians are well aware of the nightmares of problems surrounding such analyses. The highest rated schools are those that have the greatest impact on or add the most value to the knowledge, attitudes and career development of the students (see Astin, 1982). It seems obvious that many output measures depend far more on the quality of students admitted to the institution than on the functioning or quality of any particular school. The problem with using value-added analyses is that they require the collection of time-consuming, expensive, and controversial data over time (see Astin, 1982).

10. **Audience.**

My ideal school would be known in the community of consumers - parents, students and Ministry officials.

Let me give you two examples of inappropriate attention to the audience.

a. The Texas test situation.

A few years ago in Texas, every teacher was required to sit a set of basic tests in literacy, number and content area knowledge. Millions of dollars was spent in developing the test and providing in-service workshops for teachers to upgrade some of their skills. This was heralded throughout Texas as a major innovation that would certainly cure many educational ills. When the test was completed and it was announced that 99% of the teachers had passed, public reaction was one of horror. How could they have been duped into allowing the test-makers to set such an easy test. They all knew that there were teachers
out there who were lousy and needed to be dismissed from the school system and it was clear that this test, with a 99% pass rate, could not have possibly identified those. The test-makers claimed that the test was successful because the 1% of teachers who failed taught over 100,000 students and to remove bad teachers from 100,000 students’ presence was certainly a worthy aim. My point today is that testing of teachers has led to the government schooling system in Texas being widely held in disrepute.

b. Monitoring school effectiveness.

The present WA moves ignore or fail on two important criteria. They did not involve the assessed (i.e., teachers) and professionals (i.e., teachers and subject specialists) in the standard setting. Further, they appear to not be prepared to release the information -- who is going to believe glossy averages and there will be suspicion about the "real" figures.

What confidence is the community going to have. This is called shooting yourself in the foot.

I would contend, that the public should have the results of appropriate input and output performance indicators. We are doing a good job in our schools - so why are we not telling the world. Why are we letting the doomssayers and critics win with as mizzare hand. The right wing, back to basics, Neanderthal armchair critics and journalists are winning because we do not produce the evidence. Let me cite another example.

The Ministry is quite worried about the flight of students to private schools - including to Catholic schools. When asked, I advised them to collect performance data and show the community that the government schools were very successful. I pointed to the example of Narrogin - expand. An example is success at university. While the data is constrained to one institution (UWA) the data is worth publicising if I were the Ministry. The average TEE score is

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<th>System No.</th>
<th>TEE</th>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>347 386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>819 390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>436 395</td>
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It would be expected that these mean differences would be translated into similar differences at the end of first year. The following table provides the average percentage of students who pass their units in first year:

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<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>% Pass</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>67</td>
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So, something you are doing seems correct. Your students survive first year, beyond expectations.

So what are you doing to advertise or proclaim your effectiveness. Does your school newsletter/magazine highlight effectiveness and accomplishment. I note the Ministry compared to the Catholic Education newspaper. One highlights regulation changes and Ministry changes, the other highlights students and schools. The message is simple.

11. **Conclusions**

Thus, I am contending that an ideal school is one in which:

1. Has goals and expectations that are challenging and which are far beyond requesting that staff and students "do their best". These goals and expectations to be agreed among staff and students, published, and reviewed.

2. Has among its aims: maintenance of self-respect, encouragement of self-efficacy, treats students as "becoming adults" (for secondary schools), encourages students to have control over their own learning, ensures that progress of staff and students is constantly evaluated, and encourages a climate of school as a community of people.
3. Has a principal and executive team that are instructional leaders who place most emphasis on defining the above aims, creates as much time and resources for teachers to teach, provides feedback to staff and students on progress, and rewards success. Effective leaders: communicate a language of outcomes in a way that is predictable and implies a control of the process of leading to the outcomes; build an ethos and culture (that stresses collegiality, trust and empathy; experimentation and innovation; involvement via symbolic action; high expectations far beyond "doing your best"); convince others via reflective listening; and demonstrate a consistency between what they do and what they say.

4. Allows for special interest groups and encourages active, knowledgeable and meaningful participation by consumers (parents and students). This requires informing parents of the progress and goals for their children and helping parents aid their child in the learning progress.

5. Has minimal prescriptive statements about style of teaching but encourages all reasonable styles provided that the outcomes of learning are maximized.

6. Has performance indicators that relate inputs, processes and outputs, and ties these performance indicators to funding and priorities.

7. Has teachers that are specifically chosen according to the schools needs, who constantly evaluate their progress as teachers, that provide accurate and positive feedback to students, who are involved in further study, reflection and appraisal, who are competent, and who are prepared to learn as a consequence of their mistakes, their successes, from informed advice from others, and from formal evaluations.

8. Has a staff with high morale as a consequence of sharing common goals and expectations, discussion of these ideals, and where there is opportunity for knowledgeable involvement in the evaluation of their success and in the governance of the school.

9. Knows exactly where it is on the continuum towards the ideal.

10. Lets all constituents know where it is at, where it is going, and how it intends to get there.

11. Has as it ideals involvement in educating, love of learning, learning to learn, maintenance of an achievement oriented environment, care and respect and empathy for others, adult company, and rights of passage.

12. Has conditions for teaching that optimize the existence of feedback and where teachers optimize the degree that students are trained to receive feedback to verify and enhance their sense of efficacy of achievement.