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# Education for the Twenty-First Century

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## Foreword

Education for the Twenty-First Century is a lively and forceful book which should encourage passionate debate about the future, where schools are going and what the syllabus should include. As the authors say: 'Most of the writing, planning and public debate about education assumes a fairly static world picture'. Australia is moving into an unknown future with an unparalleled complexity of options open to us. We advance into a strange landscape, without maps or signposts. Hedley Beare and Richard Slaughter are sensible, well-qualified and adventurous guides for the future. Their book is both practical and imaginative.

To mix metaphors, Australians have been sprinters rather than marathoners, reluctant to plan for the medium to long term. We are paying a heavy price for our failure to confront global, long term issues in a time of technological revolution. Is our education system capable of bearing the weight we will need to place on it? A century ago schools might probably have provided about 40 per cent of all the information about the world that young people received, reinforced by contact, in and out of class, with the peer group. Home and church/Sunday school would have had more collective input than books or newspapers.

Schools once set the information agenda, although that term was not used, while home and church set the moral agenda. Now the cultural agenda is set electronically. Schools and even homes seem to have become part of the counter-culture, the resistance, fighting back with a declining share of the action.

There is a widening gap between classroom experience, which is often static and boring, where rigour and rigidity have been confused, and electronic media which tend to be non-demanding, variegated and aimed at instant gratification. In the 1960s television was welcomed as a major force for education and stimulation. How has it worked out in practice? Education never knew what hit it. Schools have rapidly declined as formative influences. Tough subjects such as the sciences, mathematics and languages are falling sharply.

There is much in the book that I disagree with – but in a way that adds to its appeal. It stimulates fresh thought. Reading the book forced me to rethink many of my own ideas (or prejudices) and that in itself makes it worth close study.

Barry O. Jones

Former Minister for Science, Parliament of Australia, and National President of the Australian Labor Party.

Canberra, 1993.

## Introduction – How this book came to be

This book grew out of a common and deep-seated concern. As colleagues on the same faculty, we discovered that we were both using parallel and complementary materials while caught up in a flurry of talks, speeches, and workshops with educators who were worried about some of the trendlines in school reform, about the way young people think of their own future, and about some of the relatively simplistic educational reforms being advocated, often by people with scant comprehension of modern educational practices. Schools as institutions, schooling patterns, the curriculum and teachers were criticized, quite trenchantly and unfairly at times, throughout the 1980s, to such an extent in fact that the reform agenda appeared to have been taken out of the hands of the providers. Economic factors and how 'useful' education is - or instrumentalism, it has been called - seemed to be driving the reformers, especially the policy makers and the politicians.

Schools were in the same no-win situation in which Brer Rabbit found himself in Uncle Remus' story about the Tar Baby; the more Brer Rabbit punched and kicked, the more he stuck to the tar baby. The problems in education, we now realize, have no lasting or satisfactory solutions while schools operate out of the framework which has determined their *raison d'être* for the past two hundred years. Education does not need fine-tuning, or more of the same; rather the fundamental assumptions about schools have to be revised. That may sound an awesome diagnosis - and of course it is - except that teachers are perennial optimists, incorrigible innovators, and they make qualitative improvements in every working day as they prepare and present their learning programs. For a group so consistently maligned and made scapegoats for societal failures, they show remarkable altruism, commitment, resilience, and above all understanding. Clearly, *schools are already doing something about the 21st Century*. It only requires some clearer vision, a stronger sense of direction, and some consistency in the way teachers operate to effect wholesale transformations.

We were aware that worldviews are changing, fast and dramatically; the events in the former Soviet Union, in South Africa, in the European Community, in Asia during the early 1990s are evidence of how fundamental assumptions are being reworked. Just as Zero Population Growth (ZPG) became accepted rapidly across the globe in the late 1970s and early 1980s and began to show up in birth rate figures within half a decade, so there are several other 'ideas whose time has come' which will radically alter the world in the next few years because they are becoming widely accepted as the basis for the ordinary person's daily behaviours. The global ecology - care for the planet - is one such notion (which we deal with in Chapter Three).

We know that 'time is running out', that there are cultural lags, that the poorly educated are sometimes among the world's worst polluters, that the 'here-and-now' still takes precedent over 'the extended present', and so on; but we can still do something about it. Furthermore, individual students, teachers, and parents can be part of the action. So we set out in this book to empower them, to put into the hands of these key people some of the thinking and the techniques which permit us to confront the future and to make it a more friendly place.

The materials in this book have been used in a number of workshops largely involving senior teachers and school administrators. Over a period of time this process not only refines the materials but also allows them to be couched in language which renders

them more accessible and useable. In short, the book's contents have been road-tested. These materials have also been used in articles and papers. Here we have tried to synthesise these materials in a form which teachers, parents, and, we hope, students can readily use. By their nature, much of the content of this book is at base complex, and it is frequently available only in out-of-the-way publications - though that is becoming less so. We have attempted throughout this book to put the content into simple language, to be luminous, to avoid obscurantist argument; we have tried to be readable and immediately comprehensible. To be thus, one has to pay a price, and we are aware that that there are important qualifications which we have had to overlook in some of our chapters. Two require comment.

We know that we seem to be addressing *Western* cultures throughout the book. We are aware of the impact of other cultures and of the fact that they may well save the world community by sponsoring better assumptions, more defensible behaviours, more ennobling attitudes, more cohesive visions. Even so, the Western worldview has had such a world-wide impact and has been taken for granted for so long that we felt compelled to concentrate on its consequences.

We are also aware of the limitations of the hierarchy metaphor, especially as we have addressed it in Chapter Four and beyond. There are of course dangers in setting things in hierarchies, for they tend to reify both dominance and domination, they lead to the false logic that 'higher' automatically means 'better', and they are unidimensional. We much prefer metaphors about connections and networks, about overlapping sets, about integration and harmonizing. Our materials in part governed our approaches here, for we were trying to make accessible some of the thinking which has led to the more embracing paradigm.

Apart from the introduction (Chapter One) and the reprise (i.e., the conclusion), the symphony we play here has two major movements. In Chapters Two, Three and Four, we deal with three of the macro-changes taking a foothold in people's thinking across the world; taken seriously and acted upon, these ideas will change the world, literally. In the following chapters - Five, Six and Seven - we suggest techniques, practical approaches, and direct action which derive from those macro-changes. In answer to the question, 'But what can we *do*?' we aimed to give some practical answers.

We are grateful for the help of many people in compiling this work. A book like this has the habit of invading our lives, sitting with us at breakfast, intruding into our household conversations, forcing forbearance on our family and close friends. We are in debt to our spouses and longsuffering close associates. No one has been more central to the success of this venture than Ms Trudy Lingwood, whose remarkable skill as an organizer and on the keyboard have saved us the marginal hours which made it possible to bring this book into being. Finally, we would like to thank the Hon. Barry Jones both for his valuable Preface, and for the many helpful comments on the text.

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