

**THE ARTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST**

**Brian J. Caldwell<sup>1</sup>**

In recent years I have gained a deep appreciation of special education, arts education and arts therapy and their importance in the overall scheme of things as efforts are made to achieve a world-class system of education. I am in awe of what has been achieved in special schools and what has been demonstrated and reported at this international symposium. My purpose is to show the significance of what you are doing, reflecting not one but two shades of meaning of the theme 'Re-imagining Special Education'. In the one hand the symposium is exploring the case for re-imagining the design and delivery of special education. Such exploration is most likely to be done by those who work in or support the field. On the other hand the symposium can serve to awaken others, outside special education, to the need for them to re-imagine special education, and to apply what they learn, not only to the support of special education but to the support of all forms of education. It is this second meaning that I have in mind today and there are powerful implications for policymakers.

The Australian Government is committed to an education revolution. While early attention was focused on providing secondary students with a computer, this by itself does not constitute a revolution, and the government does not now claim that it does. It is of course a strategy to complete or continue the digital revolution that started more than a decade ago. In recent months other strategies in the revolution have emerged but listing them is beyond my purpose today. I will deal with two more that have not yet moved to centre stage in public discourse: personalising learning and securing a place for the arts in a national curriculum. Before considering the first it is worth reflecting on the idea of an education revolution.

There are several participants in the symposium from England. I suspect that the idea of an education revolution came from an important book published shortly before New Labour came to power in the UK in 1997. I refer to Michael Barber's *The Learning Game: Arguments for an Education Revolution*<sup>1</sup>. Barber went on to become

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<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Caldwell is Managing Director of Educational Transformations and Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne where he served as Dean of Education from 1998 to 2004. This paper was presented as an invited keynote address at an International Symposium on Re-imagining Special Education through Arts Education and Arts Therapy conducted at the Melbourne Convention Centre 26-29 July 2008.

Tony Blair's chief advisor, in the first term on education reform and in the second on public sector reform as Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. He is now Expert Partner, Global Public Sector Practice, McKinsey & Company. He was co-author of the recent report of McKinsey & Company on *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems come out on Top*<sup>2</sup>. It is probably the most widely-read report in the world of education in the last twelve months. A priority in all of Barber's work has been the challenge of securing success for all students in all settings. We have embraced the same challenge in our work at Educational Transformations, for we define transformation as significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings.

It is my contention that the education revolution will not succeed and that educational transformation will not occur until all schools adopt or adapt some of the strategies that are evident in the best special schools, especially those that build approaches to learning around the arts.

### **Personalising learning**

A powerful illustration is provided in strategies for personalising learning, which has become a mantra in efforts around the world to secure success for all students in all settings. While there are many definitions and many practices are encouraged, a common feature is that there should be a learning plan for every student, that the progress of each student in this plan should be monitored frequently, that support is available to get the student back on track should he or she fall behind, and that at least one teacher should know the student well and serve as a mentor. Accounts of good practice in personalising learning are emerging.

On a national scale, Finland is invariably considered an exemplar in this respect<sup>3</sup>. As is widely known, Finland performs best out of the nations that participate in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Finland stands out because the overall mean level of performance of 15 year-olds is the highest of all nations but also because the gap between its high- and low-performing students is relatively small, and there is only a weak association between level of socio-economic disadvantage and level of performance. In the widely-used jargon, Finland is 'high quality – high equity'.

Millions of frequent-flyer points are being accumulated as leaders in education fly to Finland to learn the secrets of its success. Among many factors, one stands out, namely, no student is allowed to fall behind. Each student is monitored so well that the moment he or she falls behind, special support is provided, either one-to-one or in small groups. This is what is meant by special education in Finland. Teachers who provide such support receive additional training and are paid more. About 30 percent of all students in primary and secondary schools are supported in this way.

Why do we need to fly to Finland to fathom this out? I was recently challenged on this when I wrote an article for one of Tasmania's daily newspapers<sup>4</sup>, referring to the high level of performance of schools in Finland, highlighting in particular the special education support I have just described. An alternative opinion was published a few days later<sup>5</sup> in which the author exclaimed that 'If I hear any more about the wonders of Finland and how we should be emulating it, I think I might throw up'.

OK! If not Finland, why not special education in Australia or special education in other nations represented at this symposium, for you model best practice in personalising learning? You have a personal learning plan for every student. You monitor progress on a daily or weekly basis. You work in a team to ensure that needs are diagnosed and action is taken. High levels of skill and commitment are required. Here is how Dr Carl Parsons describes the work<sup>6</sup> of the Integrated Services Committee at Port Phillip Specialist School that involves the Principal, two Assistant Principals, Social Worker, Psychologist, Director of Integrated Services (Carl Parsons), the Speech Language Specialists, Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist, Music Therapist, Art Therapist, Drama Therapist and various members of the special education teaching staff and classroom assistants:

'For a discussion of each student, the team that comes together to discuss the student's needs may be different. For example, one student may require input from the Physiotherapist, the Occupational Therapist, the Art Teacher, the Physical Education Teacher and the Swimming Teacher.

'The Integrated Services Committee has the opportunity to identify areas of need for a student and his / her family. Practical approaches can be discussed and plans of action set. Often family members are invited to attend meetings. Parents, teachers, or any therapist can ask for a "case review" for a student at any time. Often there is linkage with external agencies and service providers so that the school is providing

the central link for meeting a student's needs. Using this integrated approach, each student's individual needs can be identified, discussed with the relevant people, and appropriate and specific actions can be taken to ensure that each student reaches his or her maximum potential'.

It is understandable that Carl Parsons declares that 'integrated services are the heart beat of the school'.

My point is this: why travel to Finland to learn how to do it when world-best practice in personalising learning is at hand? There is value of course in travelling to Finland even though the context is different. But there is also value in visiting the best special schools. In both cases there must be adaptation to the wider school setting. I see no difficulty scaling up to a school of 1,000 or 2,000 students the particular approaches that are working so well in special schools of 50 or 150 students. It will mean remarkably different approaches to the delivery of services, but that should be part of the education revolution.

### **Mobilising all of the resources in a community**

Outstanding practice in special schools also presents the best example we have yet seen of how a school can mobilise all of the resources that are available to it to achieve transformation: success for all students in all settings. We have just completed and will shortly publish<sup>7</sup> the findings of a six-country study to explore how schools that had been transformed or had sustained high performance had built strength in each of four kinds of capital and aligned them through effective governance to secure success for their students. We were seeking to validate the model illustrated in Figure 1.

Intellectual capital refers to the level of knowledge and skill of those who work in or for the school. Social capital refers to the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school and all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that have the potential to support and be supported by the school. Spiritual capital refers to the strength of moral purpose and the degree of coherence among values, beliefs and attitudes about life and learning (for some schools, spiritual capital has a foundation in religion; in other schools, spiritual capital may refer to ethics and values shared by members of the school and its community). Financial capital refers to the money available to support the school. Governance is

the process through which the school builds its intellectual, social, financial and spiritual capital and aligns them to achieve its goals.

The model in Figure 1 was the starting point for the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools. There were two stages. The first called for a review of research on the four kinds of capital and how they are aligned through effective governance. An outcome was the identification of 10 indicators for each form of capital and for governance. The second called for studies in five secondary schools in each of six countries: Australia, China, England, Finland, United States and Wales. The project was carried out by Educational Transformations with different components conducted by international partners with funding from the Australian Government and the Welsh Assembly Government.

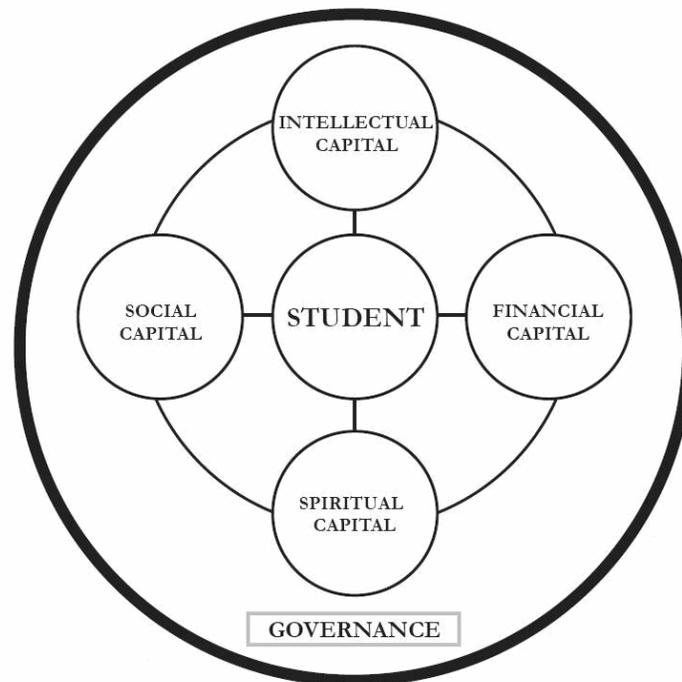


Figure 1 Alignment of four kinds of capital

Fifty indicators – 10 for each kind of capital and for governance – were identified. I will consider two sets here in the context of special schools – intellectual capital and

social capital—and illustrate briefly my contention that outstanding special schools model world-best practice. Indicators marked with an asterisk (\*) were illustrated in each school in each of the six countries. Indicators marked with a hash symbol (#) were illustrated in the majority of schools. The others were illustrated in at least one school.

### *Intellectual Capital*

1. \*The staff allocated to or selected by the school are at the forefront of knowledge and skill in required disciplines and pedagogies
2. \*The school identifies and implements outstanding practice observed in or reported by other schools
3. \*The school has built a substantial, systematic and sustained capacity for acquiring and sharing professional knowledge
4. Outstanding professional practice is recognised and rewarded
5. \*The school supports a comprehensive and coherent plan for the professional development of all staff that reflects its needs and priorities
6. #When necessary, the school outsources to augment the professional talents of its staff
7. \*The school participates in networks with other schools and individuals, organisations, institutions and agencies, in education and other fields, to share knowledge, solve problems or pool resources
8. \*The school ensures that adequate funds are set aside in the budget to support the acquisition and dissemination of professional knowledge
9. #The school provides opportunities for staff to innovate in their professional practice
10. The school supports a 'no-blame' culture which accepts that innovations often fail

Outstanding special schools including and especially those that place arts education at the centre perform well on each of these indicators. A superb illustration is contained in the approach to integrated service delivery I referred to earlier. Indeed, this approach comes closer than any I have encountered to an educational counterpart of the best of clinical approaches in health care.

### *Social Capital*

1. #There is a high level of alignment between the expectations of parents and other key stakeholders and the mission, vision, goals, policies, plans and programmes of the school
2. \*There is extensive and active engagement of parents and others in the community in the educational programme of the school
3. Parents and others in the community serve on the governing body of the school or contribute in other ways to the decision-making process
4. #Parents and others in the community are advocates of the school and are prepared to take up its cause in challenging circumstances
5. \*The school draws cash or in-kind support from individuals, organisations, agencies and institutions in the public and private sectors, in education and other fields, including business and industry, philanthropists and social entrepreneurs
6. \*The school accepts that support from the community has a reciprocal obligation for the school to contribute to the building of community
7. \*The school draws from and contributes to networks to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources
8. \*Partnerships have been developed and sustained to the extent that each partner gains from the arrangement
9. #Resources, both financial and human, have been allocated by the school to building partnerships that provide mutual support
10. \*The school is co-located with or located near other services in the community and these services are utilised in support of the school

Outstanding special schools perform well on each of these indicators. In respect to #5, I have found no counterpart in any school in any country to what has been accomplished at Port Philip Specialist School in terms of the support it has mobilised for its 'education through the arts' initiative<sup>8</sup>. No fewer than 36 organisations and institutions provide support of one kind or another, including some of Australia's largest companies and leading foundations and trusts. In addition there are numerous instances of individual support from the wider community.

We will be happy to make all 50 indicators available to schools, especially in a form that allows a self-audit to be conducted. For each indicator, respondents are invited to provide ratings of (1) importance in the context of your school, (2) how well your school is performing, and (3) the priority you attach to further development. The respondent might consider the school as a whole or a particular unit within the school. Its most frequent use is to frame an audit of a school's capacity to achieve change on the scale of transformation or to sustain high levels of performance.

### **Arts education and personalising learning**

The case for arts education and arts therapy in special education has already been made at this symposium. Illustrations and demonstrations have been presented from several countries. Consistent with the approach I am taking, my purpose at this point is to place these accomplishments in a broader context, especially in response to the focus question for the day: 'How can we shift understanding at a community and / or policy level to advocate for the importance of the arts and arts therapy in special education?'

Arts education and arts therapy demand that learning and the support of learning be personalised. Therefore, we are adding world-best approaches in arts education and arts therapy to world-best practice in personalising learning. To be blunt: this is a double whammy for policymakers who wish to transform schools and design and deliver an education revolution.

At the community level, there will be considerable attention in the days ahead to the work of Oliver Sacks, Professor of Clinical Neurology at Columbia University, who will deliver the 2006 Griffith Lecture at the Brisbane Festival on 3 August 2008 when he discusses the relationship between music, healing and the brain. The title of his most recent book *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*<sup>9</sup> will sink into public consciousness. It is a powerful affirmation of the arts and arts therapy in special education. He refers to some autistic or severely retarded people 'who may be unable to perform fairly simple sequences involving perhaps four or five movements or procedures – but who can often do these tasks perfectly well if they set them to music. Music has the power to embed sequences and to do this when other forms of organisation (including verbal forms) fail'<sup>10</sup>.

Sacks pays particular attention to people with Williams syndrome [less than one in ten thousand children] who have a 'strange mixture of intellectual strengths and deficits' with most having an IQ of less than 60. He writes that 'even as toddlers, children with Williams syndrome are extraordinarily responsive to music', observing that 'the three dispositions which are so heightened in people with Williams syndrome – the musical, the narrative, and the social – seem to go together'<sup>11</sup>.

Sacks explains how the condition involves the 'micro-deletion' of fifteen to twenty-five genes on one chromosome [out of twenty-five thousand or so genes in the normal genome] and concludes that the syndrome affords 'an extraordinarily rich and precise view of how a particular genetic endowment can shape the anatomy of a brain and how this, in turn, will shape cognitive strengths and weaknesses, personality traits, and perhaps even creativity'<sup>12</sup>.

What an exciting field you are working in! What powerful findings to build understanding of special education at community and policy levels!

### **Arts education and the national curriculum**

What is central to success in special education as far as arts education is concerned should also be central to education in general. It is therefore startling that there is no place for the arts and arts education in the remit of the National Curriculum Board (NCB), conducted under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and its Productivity Agenda Working Group. In a recent discussion paper to frame consultations on its work, the NCB declared that students' schooling 'should help develop a sense of themselves and Australian society, a capacity and disposition to contribute effectively to society, and the knowledge, understanding and skills with which to work productively and creatively'<sup>13</sup>.

Its remit in the first instance is to develop a national K-12 curriculum in English, mathematics, the sciences and history. After that it will work on geography and languages other than English. There is no reference of any kind to the arts and arts education. Its illustrations of curriculum in other nations are limited to those in its current remit.

The sidelining of the arts reflects the bifurcation in the disciplines of learning that has existed since at least the nineteenth century. Paul Johnson draws attention to the

problem in *Creators*<sup>14</sup> where he describes the work of men and women of outstanding originality, including Chaucer, Shakespeare, J.S. Bach, Jane Austen, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, Picasso and Walt Disney. In an affirmation of what has been accomplished in arts education in special schools, he declares that 'creativity is inherent in us all' and that 'since we are all made in God's image, there is creativity in all of us, and the only problem is how to bring it out.' In special education you know how to bring it out in ways that were not accomplished and could not be accomplished in a curriculum that sidelines the arts. Johnson believes that 'the art of creation comes closer than any other activity to serving as a sovereign remedy for the ills of existence'<sup>15</sup>.

Looking back over the centuries, Johnson reminds us that 'throughout history, no real distinction was made between the exercise of skill or even genius in the arts and science'. He recalls that 'Renaissance studios, especially in Florence . . . buzzed with artist scientists', concluding that 'the truth is that until the nineteenth century, there was a single culture of learning'<sup>16</sup>.

One of the most influential people in shaping the curriculum of schools is Harvard University's Howard Gardner. He developed the idea of 'multiple intelligences' more than a quarter of a century ago in which music and movement, in particular, find their place (these intelligences are the awkwardly named linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal). There would be few initiatives in curriculum development that have not drawn on his work. It is noteworthy that in his most recent book *Five Minds for the Future*<sup>17</sup>, Gardner includes the arts among requirements for learning in schools: 'I believe it is essential for individuals in the future to be able to think in the ways that characterise the major disciplines. At the pre-collegiate [school level] level, my own short list includes science, mathematics, history and at least one art form'<sup>18</sup>.

A powerful case for inclusion of arts education in a national curriculum was mounted at the Australia 2020 Summit in April 2008. One of ten streams at the summit was 'Toward a Creative Australia: The Future of the Arts, Film, and Design'. One sub-stream was concerned with education and the national curriculum. Two of eight ideas generated in discussion and included in the final report of the summit were: 'mandating inclusion of specific streams of arts and creativity – Indigenous storytelling, film, philosophy, Asian culture, music, design, art, drama – in the kindergarten to year 12 national curriculum'; and 'ensure the role of arts and

creativity is central in education through the requirement of a national reporting of creativity<sup>19</sup>. Experience in special schools demonstrates beyond a shadow of doubt that learning through the arts can be nurtured in all students no matter what their needs are; arts education is not just for the gifted!

I conclude that there is a major omission in the remit of the National Curriculum Board and I therefore call on COAG to immediately amend that remit. We must stake out and secure a place for arts education from the outset in this strand of the education revolution.

### **In the national interest**

One of the major pitfalls in policy and practice in education has been the rigid compartmentalisation of much of what we do. Examples include 'special education' and 'normal education'; 'public' and 'private'; and 'the sciences' and 'the arts'. Schools have also tended to lock out many who would dearly like for all the right reasons to give them support of one kind or another. The view that business has no place in the schools of the nation is one example.

Thankfully, things are changing and I commend Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard for advocacy along these lines in the John Button Memorial Lecture<sup>20</sup> delivered on 17 July 2008. It is probably the best articulation of what constitutes the education revolution we have heard to date. She called for a 'raging debate' about 'how our education system compares to the best in the world', 'how to ensure that every school is a great school', and 'how to ensure every child gets an excellent education'. She sparked such a debate in the days that followed with her reference to the historical opportunity to overcome the public-private divide.

Julia Gillard referred to John Maynard Keynes who said that 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?' I suggest that the facts have changed about special education. It is time to re-imagine special education and draw lessons for all schools in respect to personalising learning, drawing on the resources of the whole community, transforming approaches to learning through the arts and arts therapy, and creating a place for the arts in the national curriculum. It is in the national interest to do so.

## References

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- <sup>10</sup> Sacks, page 327.
- <sup>11</sup> Sacks, page 329.
- <sup>12</sup> Sacks, page 331.
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- <sup>16</sup> These quotations from Johnson, page 277.
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