

RE-IMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PRE-REQUISITE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS

Brian J. Caldwell¹

Aspirations for education and the well-being of society will not be achieved unless there is a transformation of schools, the re-imagination of special education and an across-the-board commitment to inclusion.

Transformation is defined as significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings. This transformation will not occur unless schools build a capacity for self-transformation. The most important role for 'the system' is to build the capacity of schools to be self-transforming.

In this presentation I will draw on my recent co-authored book *The Self-Transforming School* (Caldwell and Spinks 2013) and its predecessors – *Why not the Best Schools?* (Caldwell and Harris 2008) and *Transforming Education through the Arts* (Caldwell and Vaughan 2012), along with accounts of successful policy and practice around the world, to argue that a broader view of special education is required if the transformation of schools is to be achieved. The current narrow focus tends to push special education to the periphery. Special education should be central to the efforts of all schools and resources should reflect this requirement. Current ideas about special education and the way it is resourced have not closed the gap in levels of achievement, defined broadly, for students in Australia and many other nations in the Asia-Pacific.

Two lines of argument are presented, first, that a broader view of special education is required and second, that Australia and comparable countries must resist the temptation to narrow the curriculum in efforts to achieve a higher level of equity or secure a higher level of inclusion. There is an assumption in both lines of argument that schools must take up a higher level of autonomy, and that is the starting point in this paper.

MORE AUTONOMY FOR SCHOOLS

The findings from the most recent tests in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) support a higher level of autonomy for schools in functions that are most relevant to learning. These tests involved a sample of 15-year-olds from 65 countries. The focus was on mathematics. The findings in respect to autonomy in curriculum and assessment could not be clearer: 'Schools with more autonomy over curricula and assessments tend to perform better than schools with less autonomy when they are part of school systems with more accountability arrangements and / or greater teacher-principal collaboration in school management' (OECD 2013: 24). Another finding was that 'between 2003 and 2012 there was a clear trend towards schools using student assessments to compare the school's performance with district or national performance and with that of other schools' (OECD, 2013: 24).

There is a powerful educational logic to locating a higher level of authority, responsibility and accountability for curriculum, teaching and assessment at the school level. Each school has

¹ Brian J. Caldwell is Managing Director and Principal Consultant at Educational Transformations and Professor Emeritus at the University of Melbourne where he served as Dean of Education from 1998 to 2004. This paper was addressed in an invited keynote presentation at the First Asia-Pacific Congress on Creating Inclusive Schools on the theme Reflect – Shift – Transform, co-hosted by the Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), Sydney, 2 May 2014.

a unique mix of students in respect to their needs, interests, aptitudes and ambitions; indeed, each classroom has a unique mix. A capacity to adapt a curriculum that meets international standards to this unique mix is essential. The same applies to approaches to teaching (pedagogy).

A BROADER VIEW OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special education is traditionally and operationally defined in terms of certain ‘disabilities’ that require particular structures for learning and teaching, with different specifications for resourcing according to their nature. A higher level of transparency than has traditionally been the case has been evident as more authority and responsibility have been decentralised to schools. States and territories in Australia are responding in different ways. Table 1 contains specifications and levels of funding in one relatively decentralised system in another country – the Edmonton Public School District in Alberta, Canada – that has had more than three decades of experience with the approach. The rates indicate the amount of money that is allocated to each school for each student with the characteristics that are listed. Noteworthy are the weightings and funding rates for different categories for students with a range of disabilities.

Table 1: Student resource allocation levels, ratios and rates in the Edmonton Public School District 2011-2012 (adapted from Edmonton Public School Board 2011) (Caldwell and Spinks 2013: 161)

| <i>Category</i> | <i>Descriptors</i> | <i>Ratio</i> | <i>Rate (per student) (\$C)</i> |
|-----------------|---|--------------|---------------------------------|
| Level 1 | Elementary, Junior High, Kindergarten | 1.000 | \$5,145 |
| Level 2 | Senior High (General) | 1.003 | \$5,160 |
| Level 3 | English Language Learners (Div II-IV) International Baccalaureate (Div IV) | 1.108 | \$5,702 |
| Level 4 | Amiskwaciy, Awasis, Rites of Passage | 1.204 | \$6,194 |
| Level 5 | Communication Disability ELL Foreign Born Refugee Background Learning Disability Mild Cognitive Disability Moderate Emotional/Behavioural, Hearing, Multiple, Visual, Non-verbal Learning Disability | 1.842 | \$9,476 |
| Level 6 | Moderate Cognitive, Physical or Medical Disability Moderate Pervasive Development Disorder | 2.057 | \$10,583 |
| Level 7 | Blindness or Deafness Severe Cognitive, Emotional/Behavioural, Multiple, Physical or Medical Disability Severe Pervasive Development Disorder | 3.585 | \$18,442 |
| Level 8 | Blindness or Deafness Severe Cognitive, Multiple, Physical or Medical Disability Severe Pervasive Development Disorder | 5.024 | \$25,846 |

What has been accomplished in Edmonton and comparable systems is impressive. However, the approach focuses on only one kind of resource – money. Whether or not these funds are deployed effectively depends on a number of factors, not the least of which is the knowledge and skill of specialist teachers and other personnel, and inspired and visionary leadership.

A richer view of resourcing special education

We developed a richer view of the resources that are required to support transformation in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools, as reported in *Why not the Best Schools?* (Caldwell and Harris (2008). Drawing on findings in reviews of research, information reported by schools in more than 70 seminars and workshops in 11 countries, and focused research in 6 countries, we identified four kinds of resources, or forms of capital, that are required for transformation, as 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. (Caldwell and Harris 2008: 11)

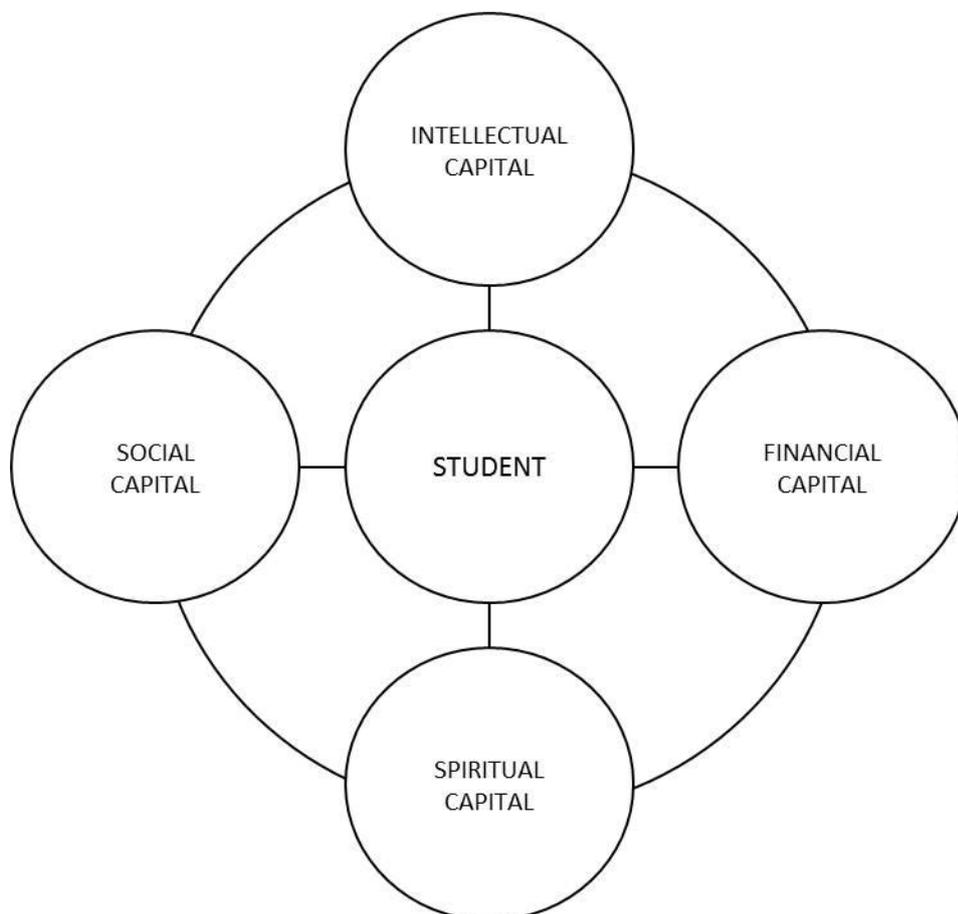


Figure 3 Alignment of four kinds of capital for the transformation of schools (Caldwell and Harris 2008: 11)

It is clear that special education as traditionally defined and proposed in this presentation calls for strength in each form of capital. In *The Self-Transforming School* we paid particular attention to social capital and inclusive education, drawing on our research at Educational Transformations that found that the not-for-profit sector was extensively involved in providing

educational opportunities for secondary students who for a variety of reasons were not attending school (Caldwell and Spinks 2013: 171-172).

Adapting the approach in Finland

If all schools did these things well Australia might move closer to jurisdictions like high-performing Finland, some provinces in Canada, and other jurisdictions, where the gap between low-and high-achieving students is relatively narrow, as highlighted in the results of PISA 2012: 'In Finland, early detection mechanisms, such as periodic individualised assessments of students by several groups of teachers, allow educators to identify struggling students and offer them the necessary support early on, before they become stuck and cannot continue their education at the same pace as their peers' (OECD 2013: 14).

It is helpful to look more closely at special education in Finland and I turn here to descriptions provided by Pasi Sahlberg in his authoritative account in *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland* (Sahlberg 2011). The following excerpts are pertinent (Sahlberg 2011: 47):

The aim of special education is to help and support students by giving them equal opportunities to complete school in accordance with their abilities and alongside their peers.

There are two main pathways in special education in the Finnish comprehensive school [*peruskoulu*]. The first path sees the student included in a regular class and provided with *part-time special education* in small groups. These groups are led by a special education teacher if the difficulties in learning are not serious. The student may also have an individual learning plan that adjusts the learning goals according to his or her abilities. . . Student assessment is then based on the individual learning plan.

The second alternative is to provide *permanent special education* in a special group or class in the student's own school or, in some cases, in a separate institution. Transfer to special education in this case requires an official decision that is based on a statement by a psychological, medical, or social welfare professional, with a mandated parental hearing.

In school year 2008-2009, almost one-third of all students in *peruskoulu* were enrolled in one of the two alternative forms of special education described above. More than one-fifth of *peruskoulu* students were in part-time special education . . . 8 percent of students were permanently transferred to a special education group, class, or institution.

Since those students who are in part-time special education normally vary from one year to another, up to half of those students who complete their compulsory education at age of 16 have been in special education at some point in their schooling.

In other words, there is nothing special anymore for students. This fact significantly reduces the negative stigma that is often brought on by special education.

The last excerpt is particularly noteworthy. It describes the change in culture that is needed in Australia if we are to be serious about inclusion.

Those who have visited a school in Finland will know how it works for part-time special education. In every school there is a group of staff who are 'on call' to work with any teacher or group of students who fall behind. They operate as a kind of 'pit crew' to ensure that no student falls behind. Charles Sabel and his colleagues investigated developments in Finland along these lines (Sabel et al., 2010) and described the work of these 'pit crews' -- Student Welfare Groups -- in the following terms:

Finnish teachers, and particularly special education teachers, are taught from the first that instruction must be connected to research into learning, and vice versa. The continuous development and refinement of assessment instruments is one expression of this connection. They are committed to the view that special needs teaching can be reconciled with — can indeed be integral to — normal classroom teaching: the prevalence of part-time special needs education is a conspicuous and, we have seen, effective expression of that commitment. They take collaboration—for example between subject or classroom teachers and special-education teachers — for granted, and engage in peer review in the SWG [Student Welfare Group] and other settings as a matter of course. (Sabel et al. 2010: 53)

Sabel is an international authority on what has become known as an ‘experimentalist approach’ in the delivery of services, described in more detail later in the paper in the context of ‘system learning’.

RESISTING THE TEMPTATION TO NARROW THE CURRICULUM

There were some troubling headlines about education in late 2013 and I refer to the results of the 2012 PISA tests (OECD 2013). The most dramatic were those in *The Australian* on December 4 (Ferrari 2013: 1): ‘Students slump in world rankings: Billions fail to stop slide in schools’.

Now it is true that we have dropped in the rankings. Other nations have overtaken us. However, surprisingly, we are one of a relatively small number of nations which are, to use the jargon, ‘High Quality – High Equity’. That we are ‘High Equity’ is surprising but that is because we are one of 65 nations that took the tests and the classification of ‘High Equity’ is relative. We are conscious of the significant inequities between and within our schools and we know that we must do much better.

Reign of Error

What we must do is resist the temptation to spend even more billions on what we know has not worked! To demonstrate this in the context of arts education I would like to call on the assistance of an eminent international scholar.

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. From 1991 to 1993 she was Assistant Secretary for Education and Counsellor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H. W. Bush. President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversaw federal testing. After previously supporting testing and extensive choice, including charter schools and the engagement of the philanthropic sector, she reversed her position on each. Her strongest criticism was levelled at the testing movement and, among other things, the way it narrowed the curriculum, including the arts.

The title of Chapter 2 in her 2010 book *The Death and Life of the American School System* (Ravitch 2010) was ‘Hijacked! How the standards movement turned into the testing movement’. She elaborated:

How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix the schools? Somehow our nation got off the track in its efforts to improve education. What once was the standards’ movement was replaced by the accountability movement (Ravitch, 2010: 16).

At the heart of the problem, according to Ravitch, is the relationship between testing and the purposes of education:

Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavour. (Ravitch 2010: 226)

Significantly, Ravitch drew attention to the balanced curriculum in countries that should be providing the benchmark for Australia and the United States.

Other nations that outrank us on international assessments of mathematics and science do not concentrate obsessively on those subjects in their classrooms. Nations such as Japan and Finland have developed excellent curricula that spell out what students are supposed to learn in a wide variety of subjects. Their schools teach the major fields of study, including the arts and foreign languages, because they believe that this is the right education for their students, not because they will be tested. They do the right thing without rewards and sanctions. Their students excel in the tested subjects because they are well-educated in many subjects that teach them to use language well and to wrestle with important ideas. (Ravitch 2010: 231)

In the arts, we should agree that all children deserve the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument, to sing, to engage in dramatic events, dance, paint, sculpt, and study the great works of artistic endeavour from other times and places. Through the arts, children learn discipline, focus, passion, and the sheer joy of creativity. We should make sure that these opportunities and the resources to support them are available to every student in every school. (Ravitch 2010, p. 235)

However, it is in her most recent book entitled *Reign of Error* (Ravitch 2013) that Ravitch makes her most powerful argument and most devastatingly relevant critique. She demolishes strategies along the lines of privatising public education, obsession with national testing programs, merit pay, laptop fads, charter schools, online learning and handing control to parents (each of which has merit in some circumstances). She highlights the benefits of early learning, wraparound services and strengthening the profession. All of this makes good reading, but what brought me to the edge of my seat was her chapter entitled 'The Essentials of a Good Education'. It might be re-issued under the title 'The Essentials of a Good Policy in Education'. Here are a few excerpts:

Every school should have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education. (Ravitch 2013: 234)

Our policy makers today think that what matters most is getting high test scores in reading and mathematics. They don't show any regrets if a school spends inordinate amounts of time and money on test preparation materials. (Ravitch 2013: 234)

We cannot provide equal educational opportunity if some children get access to a full and balanced curriculum while others get a heavy dose of basic skills. This is one instance where no research is needed. The fact of inequality is undeniable, self-evident, and unjustifiable. This inequality of opportunity may damage the hearts and minds of the children who are shortchanged in ways that may never be undone. (Ravitch 2013: 237)

All are enriched and enhanced by the arts. The arts are essential for everyone. Life is enhanced by the arts. No student should be denied the opportunity to participate in the arts or to learn about the arts here and in other cultures. All students should have the chance to sing, dance, draw, and paint in school. They should have the resources for video production and for chorus, band, orchestra and dramatics. The arts are a source of joy, a means of self-expression and group expression. To master a musical instrument or to participate in choral music requires self-discipline and practice; no

one can do it for you. Every school should have the resources to enable students to express their individuality and to take pleasure in joyful communal activity. (Ravitch 2013: 240)

Sadly, the growing obsession with data has shoved aside these important goals (Ravitch 2013: 241)

The line of argument presented by Ravitch is devastating as far as inclusion is concerned. Expressed simply, equity is impaired if a broad curriculum that includes the arts is not made available to all students. We have narrowed the curriculum in our focus on literacy and numeracy – a strategy intended to enhance equity -- and findings in PISA and NAPLAN suggest that it is not working.

Could arts education help lead Australia's climb up the international league tables?

I would like to seriously advance the proposition that placing specialist arts teachers in all Australia's schools would lead Australia's climb up the international league tables much faster than any of the current strategies and at far less cost than anything envisaged at this time. I have not seen the arts mentioned in any media comment following the release of PISA 2012. Let me give you a glimpse of the evidence, which is drawn from *Transforming Education through the Arts* (Caldwell and Vaughan 2012).

Our research team examined the performance of students in 10 schools in highly disadvantaged settings in Western Sydney. Three schools offered the longer-term program of The Song Room (TSR) over 12 to 18 months, and three schools offered an initial short-term program of 6 months. In each instance the program was conducted for Grades 5 and 6 students for one hour on a single day once per week. A control group of four schools did not offer The Song Room program. The three groups of schools were a matched set as far as socio-educational advantage is concerned. The study was a rare example of quasi-experimental design in educational research.

Important differences were found in favour of students that undertook the TSR program. The findings have national and international significance. First, related research in other countries was confirmed. Participation in TSR was associated with a gain of approximately one year in Year 5 NAPLAN scores in reading and approximately half a year in science and technology when compared to outcomes for students in matching schools.

Even more powerful in its implications were the findings in our evaluation of another Song Room program entitled Creative Arts Indigenous Parental Engagement (CAIPE) offered in selected schools in urban, regional and remote settings in Queensland where there were significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A summary of findings may be found on The Song Room website at www.songroom.org.au. The study focused on students in Grades 3 – 5 and on three elements that endeavoured to secure the engagement of parents and other members of the community in support of school-based arts initiatives. As with the other study reported above, there was significant improvement in attendance on days when the program was offered and improved outcomes for students in literacy. Parents responded positively to the program and their engagement.

The findings are of particular interest as far as policy is concerned. Programs have been initiated to get more Indigenous students to school through the employment of truancy officers. There has been an improvement in attendance of about the same order as the introduction of programs in the arts. A combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors may be especially powerful.

Now here's an interesting possibility. I did not have time to work out the implications based on 2012 PISA but here is what we may learn from 2009 PISA, as suggested in Table 1 which indicates how many months our Australian 15-year-olds are behind counterparts in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. Assuming we can place arts specialists in schools where they can make a difference, as in our studies in Western Sydney, they can help

schools go a long way in closing the gap in a relatively short time at a fraction of the cost of strategies that have failed to make much of a difference.

Table 1: The number of months that students in Australia are behind 15-year-old counterparts in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore in Reading, Mathematics and Science (adapted from OECD 2011)

| Jurisdiction | Reading | Mathematics | Science |
|------------------|---------|-------------|---------|
| China: Hong Kong | 6 | 12 | 7 |
| China: Shanghai | 13 | 25 | 15 |
| Singapore | 3 | 14 | 5 |

If we are serious about addressing our deficits as far as equity is concerned then we need to re-balance the curriculum along the lines that Dianne Ravitch proposed and abandon exclusive reliance on high-cost approaches that simply haven't worked at scale. That is how we will fund the relatively modest costs of placing specialist arts teachers in every school in the state. Such a strategy is not, of course, the only one. We must place a high priority on enhancing the quality of initial teacher education and building the capacity of the profession in areas that are likely to make a difference, but that's another story.

LEADERSHIP AND SYSTEM LEARNING

We cannot achieve a higher level of inclusion by trying harder in implementing current strategies for school improvement. Underpinning transformation must be extensive innovation.

The opportunities for innovation are indicated by ① in Figure 1, suggesting that innovation can occur in curriculum, personnel, budget, community engagement, learning and teaching, and outcomes. However, this innovation does not arise spontaneously; its practice depends on how the school is led and managed, and approaches in these are determined to a large extent by approaches to governance. What can or cannot be done at the school level is constrained to the extent that the school has the necessary authority to act and this is an example of where the system framework is important.

The authorities and accountabilities that shape what can be done at the school level are shown at the left of Figure 1, but other aspects of the system framework apply, and these include the application of a national/state curriculum (described in more detail below), the various enterprise agreements, and policies and procedures concerning the human resource, including approaches to the selection of staff and performance management. System support is crucial, hence the inclusion at the bottom of Figure 1 of funding, infrastructure and professional support to build the capacities of schools in learning and teaching.

There are two challenging aspects of Figure 1. The first derives from some creative insights in Malcolm Gladwell's recent book *David & Goliath: Underdogs, misfits and the art of battling giants* (Gladwell 2013). [Gladwell popularised the concept of the 'tipping point' in social change in *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell 2000)]. 'Innovators have to be open. They have to be willing to imagine things that others cannot and to be willing to challenge their own preconceptions' (Gladwell 2013: 116). This is the mindset that is required to re-imagine special education. Gladwell cites playwright George Bernard Shaw:

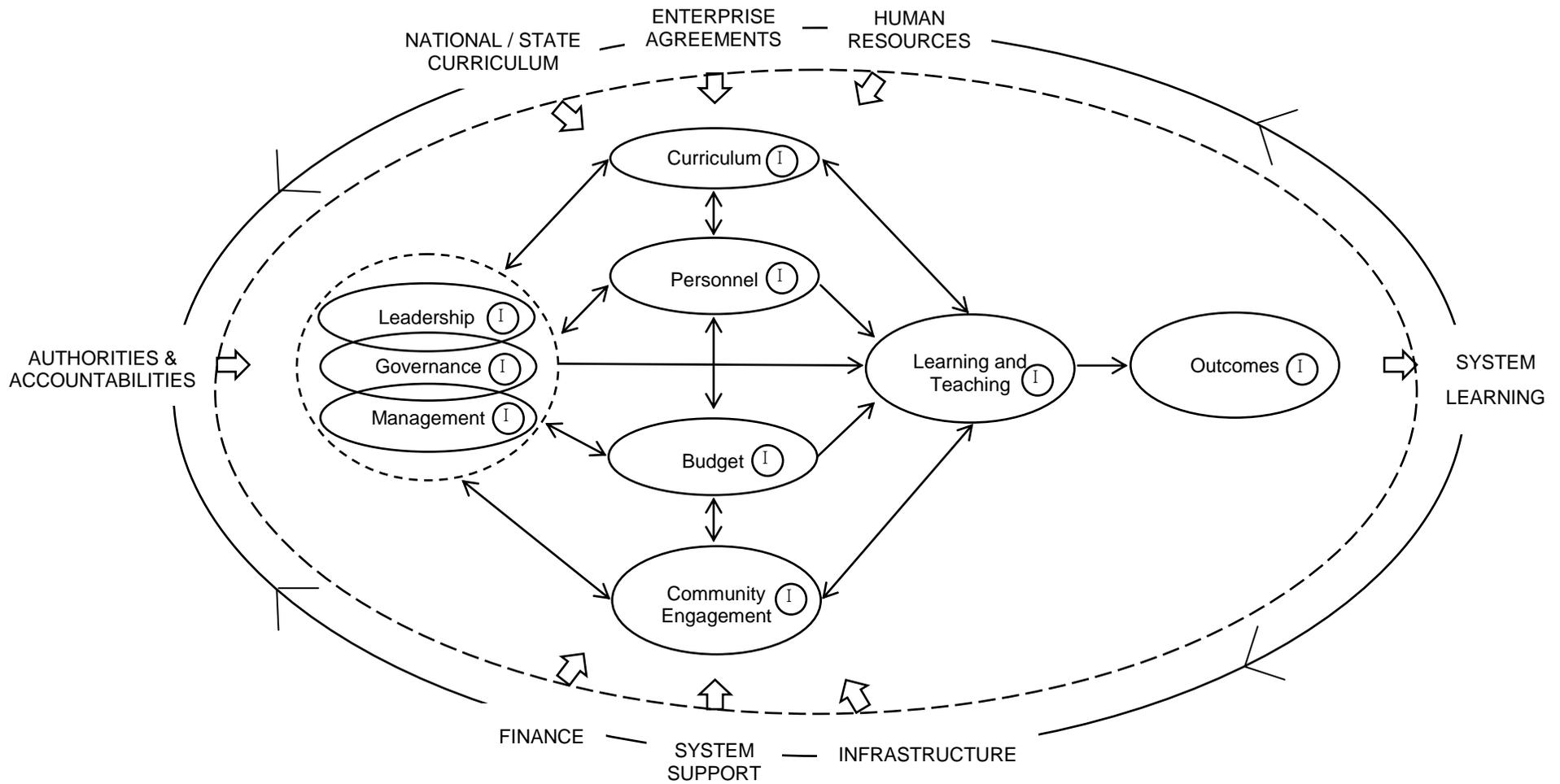


Figure 1: Framework for leadership and system learning ©

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The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man (cited by Gladwell 2013: 117).

The second challenge is evident in another feature of Figure 1, namely, the call for 'system learning' on the basis of the outcomes and what has been learnt in schools. This re-balances the dependence on top-down approaches that have characterised recent reform efforts in Australia. Such learning is also evident at the school level (indicated by the two-way arrows in the various connections). It is a characteristic of the 'experimentalist' or 'pragmatic' approach of Charles Sabel, as illustrated earlier for Student Welfare Groups in Finland schools. Such an approach calls for a relatively high level of autonomy at the school level, and this theme, introduced at the start of the paper, is taken up in the context of curriculum.

Adapting the Australian Curriculum

Australia has a national curriculum. Its development is one of a range of strategies that are intended to lift the performance of students. Developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) it was adopted with the support of all state and federal ministers for education. It is currently under review. Closer examination of delivery reveals that the national curriculum, as such, is not necessarily manifested in the learning experience of students in classrooms around the nation. Figure 2 illustrates the 'delivery chain', so to speak, with the national curriculum incorporated in state curricula, with adaptations to suit priorities in particular states, with further adaptation at the school level.

Inevitably, teachers tailor experiences to the needs of their students. Key questions are posed in Figure 2: Does the school have or exercise authority to adapt the curriculum? Do teachers have the capacity to adapt the local version of the curriculum to the needs of their students? Do the school and its staff have the capacity to tailor the curriculum in personalised learning? Achieving success for all students in all settings assumes an affirmative response to each of these questions, and the nature of these responses determines the nature and scope of innovation in schools.

Affirmative responses call for action in three 'policy domains', as illustrated in Figure 2. Policy Domain 1 calls for states to adapt the national curriculum to suit their circumstances. Policy Domain 2 requires states to provide schools with significant autonomy to tailor the curriculum to meet the mix of student needs and local priorities / specialisations. Policy Domain 3 requires teachers to have the capacities to personalise learning.

Conclusion

I hope that I have reinforced the themes and strategies that have been addressed elsewhere in this important conference. For example, my focus on arts education affirms what has been presented by Sara James that highlighted achievements at Port Phillip Specialist School in Melbourne, as described in *An Extraordinary School: Remodelling special education* (James 2012). My reference to our research that involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students should anticipate what follows in the keynote of Warren Mundine. Here in short form are my main messages to policymakers and practitioners:

- All schools everywhere should embrace a new image of special education and adopt innovative strategies to help secure success for all students
- As things stand, most schools have more to learn from specialist schools than vice-versa, especially in respect to personalising learning
- There is powerful evidence that narrowing the curriculum is harming equity and hence inclusion by a well-meaning but excessively narrow and unrelenting focus on literacy and numeracy
- Top-down command-and-control strategies have their place in some circumstances but the direction should be reversed, as it were, to ensure that there is 'system learning' from what has been accomplished in schools.

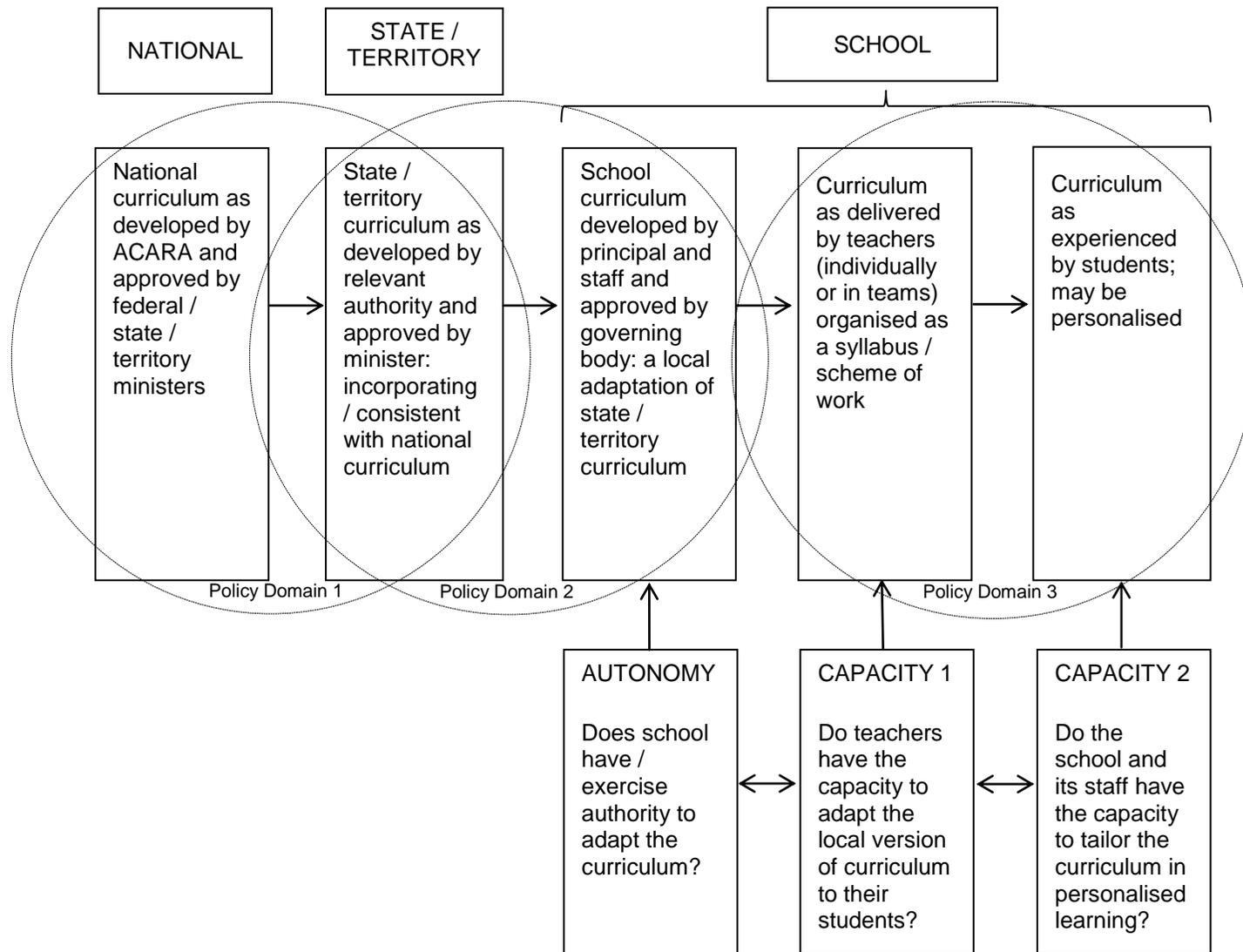


Figure 2: Framework for leadership in curriculum ©

- High levels of school autonomy are required to achieve these outcomes, and the most important role for 'the system' is to help build the capacity of all schools to be self-transforming
- We can't realise the vision of inclusion by trying a bit harder in current approaches – dramatic changes to policy and practice are required.

Some words in the title of Malcolm Gladwell's book are relevant to the magnitude of the challenge -- *David & Goliath: Underdogs, misfits and the art of battling giants* (Gladwell 2013). Two statements in his summary about the battle between David and Goliath are pertinent to special education at the periphery and taking on the task of transforming for inclusion:

In reality, the very thing that gave the giant his size was also the source of his greatest weakness. There is an important lesson in that for battles with all kinds of giants. The powerful and strong are not always what they seem.

David came running toward Goliath, powered by courage and faith [and also by superior technology]. Goliath was blind to his approach – and then he was down, too big and slow and blurry-eyed to comprehend the way the tables had been turned. All these years, we've been telling these kinds of stories wrong. *David and Goliath* is about getting them right. (pp. 14-15)

Despite outstanding work in many schools, our traditional approach to organising education through large often unresponsive monolithic organisations that are slow to adapt must change.

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