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## THERE IS MORE TO TRANSPARENCY THAN MEETS THE EYE

Lyndsay Connors, AM FACE  
ACE National President

Transparency is vital to the quality of any open, democratic society, where information flows freely between the general public and governments, and where governments are accountable to the electorate for the outcomes of their public policy and investment decisions.

This is in contrast with societies where information is kept secret by those 'in the know', to be used for their own or their families' advantage, societies where withholding information leaves citizens ignorant of their opportunities and risks and vulnerable to the latter.

Our governments have a responsibility to create the conditions necessary for that free flow of information, for true democracy to flourish.

Teaching is one of the key professions in creating those conditions. This is why it is so troubling to see the teaching profession and governments at odds over the *MySchool* website.

The purpose of *MySchool* is to provide information about our schools to parents and the community. There is clear evidence of parent and community demand for such information. There has also been demand from the education profession itself for information on how schools in different communities perform, as a guide to policy for lifting the quality of schooling generally and to the options for dealing with the persisting problem of too many students leaving their schools without gaining the full benefits.

These demands need to be understood in the current economic and political context. Education is now widely recognised as a major factor in economic development, as well as for its intrinsic social and cultural purposes.

This economic imperative has effects that are relevant to the current discord about the uses and abuses of transparency.

First, the economic significance of education puts governments themselves, and education ministers, in particular, under pressure to justify public investment in education with hard evidence of value for money. Second, the increasing significance of education qualifications to the life chances of individuals has fanned into life the market forces that are intrinsic to education, and has created a competition for advantage among schools, teachers and parents.

The fact that many of us, as educators, may not welcome these effects does not deny their reality. Such realities lie behind, for example, the statement in the 2008 ACER policy brief, *Output Measurement in Education*, that 'the continuing role of standardised assessments in providing reliable information for a new education market is inevitable and justified'.

In relation to schooling, it would be rare to find teachers explaining their reasons for entering the profession in terms of a commitment to overcoming national skills shortages. We know from experience and research that it tends to be the social and cultural purposes of schooling that motivate people to become teachers (although these purposes are, in reality, far from discrete).

Throughout the community, there are those who welcome the increasing market competition driving our school system, for the increased opportunities available to those children well-placed to benefit. But educators, as a group, tend to wring our hands at the idea that the quality of schooling children receive is contingent upon the

vagaries of market forces. None know more clearly than school teachers that schooling is an arena of social competition. And none know more clearly than those teachers whose careers have spanned the length and breadth of our large school systems, government and non-government, just how very unequal that playing field is and how ugly that social competition can be for those children growing up in hardship, through no fault of their own.

The discord being generated by the *MySchool* website is, in my view, a symptom of the need for a debate that goes beyond the claimed inaccuracies and biases in the information on the website. Underlying these issues is a more fundamental question about the proper role of government in relation to the rampant market forces now re-shaping our school system. Is it the role of government to mediate, or simply to reinforce, these market forces? Or to attempt to hold some kind of balance between the weak and strong through a web of countervailing policies?

There are inherent tensions in governments' stated rationales for *MySchool* that raise these very questions. There is a concern for equity, expressed in the argument that shining a light on inequalities will enable governments to better target their efforts and resources. A second rationale is that access to information about the performance of schools will allow those parents in a position to do so to select the schools where they feel their own children will fare best.

This movement of children from well-informed and well-resourced families into the schools with the highest achievement scores, a trend already apparent and well-documented in this country, has the inevitable effect of leaving numbers of schools with an increased concentration of their less advantaged counterparts. It is now widely accepted that the effect of concentrating students who are educationally disadvantaged in particular schools will be to compound their individual disadvantage.

Given the pressure of electoral cycles, it is easy to see why governments, committed to transparency, would make haste to set up a *MySchool*, arguing that it is better to get something less than perfect up and running than to engage in the search for perfection and end up with nothing. And it is clear that some of the inaccuracies and flaws that have drawn criticism can be attributed directly to a straitened timetable.

But the same governments should now be open to constructive and well-informed proposals for improvement. There is now a need for governments and the education profession to develop a clearer, mutual understanding of the concept of transparency.

For there is much more to transparency than meets the eye.

For a start, there is a difference between seeing and understanding. Transparency means that the information provided must be meaningful for the user. When my GP sends me for a set of blood tests, the results come back to her from the pathology lab, and she hands them over for me to look at. Then I hand them back for her to explain their significance. Only then do they become transparent. If she simply emailed them to me, I may well react with groundless alarm; or relax into a risky complacency.

Transparency does not exist in a vacuum. What may be transparent to some of the target audience for *MySchool*, parents and community members, will be less so to others. And when action is needed as a result of the pathology results they receive, not all Australians live in areas that offer as privileged access to health services as I.

What lies behind the set of numbers my doctor takes me through entails far less complexity than what is entailed in the assessment of each student's literacy and numeracy performance on a standardised test, not to mention the process of representing that performance as a single number for each school to enable it to be ranked against all other schools; and then against a group of 'statistically similar' schools. Some material and some concepts are simply more difficult to make transparent and meaningful for the intended audience than others – some maybe too difficult for this treatment.

Those who are trying to argue this case are in distinguished company. As editor of the ACE Yearbook for 2000 (*School Resourcing: Models and practices in changing times*), the late Professor Peter Karmel AC CBE

counselled that when it comes to schooling, defining the characteristics of inputs and outcomes is so complex as to become either difficult or conceptually impossible. He pointed out that ‘...this is partly because teachers vary greatly in their attributes as does the quality of the environments in which they work and the students with whom they work’...; and that it is also ‘...because the outputs/outcomes of education are intended to serve a wide range of purposes’.

Karmel was one of Australia’s leading intellectuals - a distinguished economist, Vice Chancellor (of both Flinders and the ANU) and chair of the Australian Universities Commission and the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. In 1973, he headed the Interim Committee that produced the blueprint for the Schools Commission set up by the Whitlam Government. This does not require us to agree with his every word on schooling, or to presume to opine what he might have said about *MySchool*. But it does require us to take what he said seriously. And to understand that subtlety is required in dealing with complexities and with competing truths.

In the ACE Yearbook, Karmel argued that there was no case for deploring an emphasis on the outputs and outcomes of schooling, from the standpoint of the key purposes of schooling and a concern with teacher effectiveness; or an emphasis on the critical importance of the basic skills. But, as he argued, there was a case for understanding that:

*...the benefits of education, both of the individual and to society, are realised not simply when the individual exits an educational institution, but accrue over their lifetime. Only partial benefits can be captured by performance indicators measured at a particular point of time. There is also the question of whether a student’s achievement should be measured in terms of performance at the time of leaving school or in terms of the value added to their performance between entry to school and exit.*

Put far less elegantly, what this means is that there is more to transparency than waving a flashlight around and bringing it to rest on whatever pieces of information happen to be conveniently to hand...in this case NAPLAN results.

The students whose performance is attributed to their schools on the *MySchool* website are growing up in circumstances that affect their school performance negatively. The idea that parents should necessarily be ‘rousing’ on or, for that matter, congratulating and rewarding teachers for *MySchool* rankings is at odds with the best of professional thinking about how the quality of teaching might be assessed, across very different school settings.

Raewyn Connell reminds us, in a 2009 article in *Critical Studies in Education* 50: 3, (213 – 229), that the work of teachers is complex and it is collective, so that ‘...whether an individual teacher appears to be performing well depends a great deal on what *other people* are doing’. And those other people are both within and beyond schools. Forms of accountability that avoid such real-life complexities can endanger rather than enhance the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

Despite the risk of this article committing the sin of reflecting on times past, it has to be said that the most sustained period of transparency was the era when the former Commonwealth Schools Commission shone its light on Australian schooling. Using its status as an independent, statutory authority, it collected data and information and provided a useful, public analysis and commentary. Such an agency can build up the expertise and experience to deal in an open and consultative way with complex and contested issues – within a timeline acceptable to governments. As well as this, they provide a public space that is now sorely needed for the analysis and discussion of complex issues in a way that allowed a bridge between government, the profession and the broader community.

In the absence of such an agency, what should be a civil, public and rational discussion about how best to achieve the stated aims of *MySchool* has descended into a quarrel that has now put at risk the regimen of testing which took the investment of time and intellectual effort to construct - and of which the majority of teachers made good use in their schools. The reporting process itself has now become a subject of heated disputation and controversy, distracting from the very policy issues it was meant to illuminate.

As a profession, educators are not without some responsibility for the position in which we find ourselves. When it has come to setting standards, for example, discussion can drag on for years, with little sense of urgency. We should as a profession understand that students will only pass through the school system once. And we should perhaps be more realistic about the sense of urgency generated for governments by the political cycle. There is no doubt that it is this political urgency that has led to *MySchool* being launched in haste, with the predictable consequences.

The stated intentions of *MySchool* embody what are increasing tensions in our society between the democratic values of liberty and equality, where choice for some is at odds with opportunity for others. But what of the remaining democratic value – solidarity? My fear is that, by encouraging parents to focus any more than they already (and understandably) do on researching *MySchool* and their own child's school, governments are discouraging them from focusing on what is going on in *OurSchools*. This may well have the effect, whether or not by design, of reducing the pressure on governments from parents and communities to raise the quality of schooling overall. Truly wise parents understand that their children's futures will be directly affected by what is happening in other children's schools, and possibly more than by what is happening in their own.

Just as I was completing this article, this conclusion was pre-empted by Jessica Irvine, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald of 23<sup>rd</sup> April about the "I" phenomenon, the world of the iPod, of *MyChild* and *MySchool*. Irvine pondered whether the increasingly common use of the "my" prefix demonstrated "...how far we've come towards reflecting the selfish individuals of rationalist economic theory... and whether, armed with our range of new online tools to maximise our utility... "there is now no "our" and only "my".

There is an urgent need to create the conditions for an open and rational discussion of how to achieve an approach to transparency that can strengthen our education system to meet its challenges.

Allowing *MySchool* to become a source of ongoing contention between governments and the teaching profession is fraught with risk. Parents will be put in the unenviable position of choosing between their children's teachers and co-operating in government policies. The potential for children to be caught up in this disputation, to the detriment of their schooling, cannot be ignored. Nor can the potential to undermine public confidence in our teachers and in many of our schools – or, over the longer term, in governments themselves.

This does not mean abandoning the work that has been invested in *MySchool* to date. It needs to be seen as a step towards the development of a comprehensive and sustainable national system for monitoring and reporting on schools. This needs to be based on explicit and agreed principles, to be built up carefully over time, and to include: reporting on curriculum-based assessments of student achievement; program evaluation studies; in-depth case studies related to policy priorities; a comprehensive, national statistical data collection; and greater provision for general research. It could well include external appraisal of the performance of individual schools by panels of professional educators – a contemporary version of the former 'inspectorates' in our public school systems.

There is also a need to create the capability for provision of independent, expert and public advice on the establishment and ongoing operation of this information, monitoring and reporting system. This would be consistent with the standards of transparency and accountability governments espouse for schools; and would increase public confidence in, and understanding of the national reporting process. To avoid a proliferation of agencies, this public advisory and consultative capacity could be achieved by strengthening ACARA or creating a committee of ACARA for the purpose. If transparency is worth doing, it is worth doing well.

Transparency is as transparency does. The fact that there are schools with chronic under-achievement resulting from social, economic and educational disadvantage should not be swept under the carpet. But when we shine a light on these schools that have become firmly stuck in the bright-red *MySchool* zone, we are morally obliged to make a sustained commitment to taking the complex action needed to change the preventable factors, within and beyond the school system, that interact to produce these shameful circumstances. For there is an ethical dimension to transparency.