



# Ring the changes

A new vision is needed if schools are to survive in the 21st century, writes **GEOFF MASLEN**

*"My education was of the most ordinary description, consisting of little more than the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic at a common day school. My hours out of school were passed at home and in the street."*

— **Michael Faraday**

**I**N the long history of humankind, school is an aberration. Mass schooling – the idea that all young people should spend a certain period of their lives segregated in a special institution in the company of others of the same age – was an invention of the 19th century. Yet, so woven into the fabric of our lives has the school system become that we can't imagine a society without it. We forget, however, how much our notions of schooling have changed.

In most states, the formal education system was created more than 120 years ago but then it was entirely different to that of today. Not all children went to school and not everyone went there every day of the week. Most youngsters dropped out at the end of the primary years and went off to join the adults.

Although still relatively new and subject to profound changes during the years, school now seems secure: more students are staying for a longer time than at any other period in our history. Just as universal primary schooling became accepted last century, so too has the idea of everyone remaining to year 12, while post-school education is becoming the norm for most young Australians.

This is despite the fact that to many young people, school remains an alienating experience. And no wonder! Schools are still places that regiment children, put them into uniforms, age-grade them in classes no matter what their knowledge, intelligence or maturity, that sit them in rows, looking to the front where an adult, (a talking head in an age of extraordinary electronics!) attempts to daily dose them with what must, to the kids, seem like random bits of knowledge.

Asked about his own schooling, Albert Einstein recalled: "One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect that after I had passed the final examinations, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful for an entire year ... It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry."

Einstein's "modern methods of instruction", of course, were those of a century ago. But they are the same ones whose virtues are regularly celebrated by conservative critics of today's schools.

The children, however, see it from a different perspective. Their lives are ordered according to the dictates of a timetable – for hour after hour, day after day, year after year. Knowledge, whether it is relevant and interesting, potentially useful or blindingly dull, is parceled out in 40 or 60-minute bits and delivered in most classrooms by the full frontal method of instruction.

This extended institutionalisation creates serious problems of student motivation and discipline, but it also makes the transition from the "information-rich but action-poor" classroom to working life an often-traumatic experience.

Indeed, so removed are many youngsters from the real world outside the school gate that they have only the remotest idea of what their parents actually do. Too few students play a part in adult affairs or are given the opportunity to shoulder adult responsibilities.

In school, the student who successfully masters the rituals is rewarded, while the one who rejects them is not. The American behaviourist, BF Skinner, once noted that the student who in impeccable French can say "Pass me the salt" gets an A. His French counterpart who utters the same words gets the salt.

The evidence is there that schools continue to fail many of their clients – although in a curious twist, it is the youngsters who are blamed and who get to be labelled failures.

For a time in the 1970s and early 1980s, critics of traditional schooling were given a hearing but they were ultimately silenced by the overwhelming conservatism of the late '80s and '90s.

The de-schoolers and other opponents of formal education lost the "school is dead" debate almost a decade before. Nevertheless, there are still powerful



arguments why school should not continue to exist, at least in its present form. Efforts at reform, however, have created oddly diverse controversies.

The "neo-Rousseauians", like Ivan Illich and Paul Goodman, called for the de-schooling of society entirely; the neo-Marxists, on the other hand, wanted school preserved but reshaped so as to serve and match society with a new order of production. The conservatives, meantime, kept up their attacks on schools, claiming that "standards", particularly the basics, had been continuously slipping.

In the middle of all this, teachers went ahead doing the things they have always done. It is a natural enough response. "The past went that-a-way," Marshall McLuhan said. "When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavour of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future ..."

This is not to say that schools have not changed. They have: today, most are far more caring, more convivial places than they were in the past. Students have a greater role in many classrooms and most now have a bigger selection from the curriculum smorgasbord than before.

Schools themselves, despite over-worked and stressed teachers, are still better equipped, better staffed and better looked after than they were 50 years ago – although those times seem to be returning.

Society's demands on school have also changed. As well as imparting the basic skills, teachers are expected to shoulder other responsibilities that impinge on student health, sexuality, nutrition, careers, personal problems – a growing list of roles that extends all the way to safe driving habits and anti-smoking campaigns.

One of the great puzzles of life, says the American writer Michael Katz, is the faith in the school as an instrument for coping with social problems, despite evidence to the contrary. "The illnesses of society become diagnosed as simply a lack of education and the prescription for reform becomes more education."

Along with this attitude is the idea that school should serve in bringing about a more just, more equal society. On the other hand, critics argue that schools help perpetuate social and class differences.

School is also expected to respond to the demands of the labour market and the requirements of higher education. Instead of being the "great equaliser", school has become the "great sorting machine".

Such contradictory demands on the school, and its failure to properly "educate" many of its students, create conflicts and frustrations. What is needed, then, is a new vision of what school should be about.

Such a vision might include:

- Formal, full-time schooling for 13 years for everyone needs to change both in the mode of operation and the years of attendance required. Young people need less schooling of the kind they get at present. They now probably learn more about life and living outside

school – especially from television – than they do in the classroom. Yet the school takes no account of this. If it is to survive, school must relate much more to the adult world beyond the school gate

- As more schools are demonstrating, the magic of the microchip is capable of transforming the way children learn and teachers teach. Other schools will be sidelined unless they take note and adapt to the amazing technological changes occurring in industry, business, and higher education

- Computer-based instruction and interactive video-disks are capable of linking the classroom with students around the world and of providing one-to-one tutorials for everyone. The teacher as facilitator will no longer be a catch-cry but a reality

- Lifelong or recurrent education is becoming increasingly accepted as a necessity in a world where people will change their jobs – just as the jobs will change – several times in a working lifetime. Students need to learn adaptability. Yet too much of what students learn in school, and how they learn it, is valueless and they could better spend their time in the workplace or the community at large, sharing school and work

- The rise of credentialism – the inflation of certificates, diplomas and degrees; whereby people need higher and higher academic qualifications to perform increasingly less skilled jobs – should be resisted. Less emphasis needs to be placed on marks, examination results and certificates and more on the skills young people need to survive on their own, to make their way in the world without institutional props

- To learn to take responsibility for their own lives, students have to be given more responsibility. They need a greater say in what happens while they are in school and they should be encouraged and helped to work with a wider range of younger and older people. The age-graded classroom is a relic of a bygone era and schools need to experiment again with vertical grouping, more flexible hours and improved links with bodies outside in the community

- Alternatives to school are needed – now more than ever. We should be experimenting with farm schools, work camps, community service, schools without walls, the city as school.

Paul Goodman, who once described the American high school as a "therapeutic halfway house for the insane", also observed: "More than anything, we need a community and community spirit in which many adults who know something – not only professional teachers – will pay attention to the young."

That was written in the 1960s but the message applies just as validly to today.

- **Geoff Maslen taught in schools in Australia and Britain for 20 years before becoming an education journalist. He was one of the founders of the Swinburne Community School in Melbourne in the early 1970s**

**"Teachers are expected to shoulder other responsibilities that impinge on student health, sexuality, nutrition, careers, personal problems ..."**

