

# The revolutions we need to have<sup>1</sup>

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**There is no doubt that the phrase “The Education Revolution” as distinct from ‘a revolution in education’, coined by the ALP spin doctors before the 2007 election, has been very effective. Some might say it ranks alongside Gough Whitlam’s “It’s time” as one of the most memorable epithets in recent Australian political history.**

What then Prime Minister Rudd and his Education Minister Julia Gillard sought to achieve under the banner of ‘The Education Revolution’ was, by modern standards, quite impressive. It included the roll out of two billion dollars worth of computers, the framing of a national curriculum where others have tried and failed, the establishment of new standards, the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the creation of the *My School* website, the implementation of national partnerships and the progressive diminution of state sovereignty over school education. Most governments in the past have been content to tackle just one big initiative at a time realising that even one initiative can take eons to implement. The Rudd Government overwhelmed the educational community with a multiplicity of initiatives concurrently. It is too early to judge how effective any of these initiatives have been, let alone to establish whether individually or collectively, they represent a revolution in educational practice, let alone educational thinking.

At the same time, observers of Australian education have recognised that the past decade has seen an increased emphasis on pragmatism and utilitarianism as the driving forces behind education. Instead of defining the purposes of education in terms of personal growth and character formation, education more often than not is now described in terms of its contribution to national productivity. This shift in emphasis explains the focus on national curriculum, national assessment, national standards and the ubiquitous *My School* website. Such a revolution has its good points as well as its bad points.

A less perceptible revolution, but no less real, has been the demise of ‘the development of the whole person’ in favour of more specialised, partial

development of persons. Instead of setting out to develop in a holistic way, the academic, physical, social, cultural, moral and spiritual dimensions of their children, the majority of schools are focusing their efforts on the academic, the social and the physical domains almost to the exclusion of the cultural, moral and spiritual. It could be said in many cases, parents have been accomplices in this unfortunate distortion in education by not challenging its incompleteness.

Some commentators have questioned whether Australia needed Rudd’s “Education Revolution”. Others have gone further to question whether Australia needs a revolution of any kind in education. For my part, from a Christian educator’s perspective, there are at least eight areas in which some revolutionary thinking, talking and action is needed.

### Revolution 1: An authentic Australian Christian approach to education

The first of these is the need for us to create an authentic Australian Christian approach to education. This will be an approach that impacts education, formal and informal, from the cradle to the grave, that includes early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, tertiary education of all kinds, formal and informal adult education, credentialed and non-credentialed.

Note the need is not for an approach to Christian education but rather a Christian approach to education. The term ‘Christian education’ has become a cliché devoid of quality. The term ‘Christian education’ has come to mean almost anything you like that has to do with Christianity. On the other hand, a Christian approach to education is one that is deeply informed by a biblical theology and worldview.

The very mention of the term ‘worldview’ is a turn-off for many people in Australia, including Christians and is regarded by some people as being too cognitive, or too clinical. But the reality is, each views the world—what we read and what we hear, what we teach—through a lens that is shaped, more than we realise, by what we value and desire. What we desire above all else frames our priorities and our behaviour, in schools and in our teaching.

A Christian approach to education includes how to:

- present the prescribed curriculum;
- choose between the myriad of options provided for in the syllabuses;

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an edited version of Bryan Cowling’s Opening Address to the National Christian Schools Policy Forum in Canberra on 24 May, 2010.

- explain the purpose of learning;
- regard students (sponges to soak up knowledge stuff, automatons to be programmed to think and speak in a certain way, clones to be shaped into an image of the parent or educator, eternal creatures made in God's image to love and serve him forever, devils to be disciplined);
- assess what has been learned, and why.

A Christian approach impacts the way teachers nurture and challenge students' talents and abilities for the benefit of the class and community. A Christian approach to education gives a different meaning to pastoral care, a different meaning to service, a different meaning to quality and a different meaning to leadership. A Christian approach to education is integral to making people whole. A Christian approach to education challenges two of the gods of this age: individualism and consumerism and emphasises a fundamental principle of relationalism in God's world.

An authentic 'species' that is Australian is needed, not a transplant from somewhere else. But more than that, educators need to frame a Christian approach to education in a language that enables discussion about it and linkage into the public market place, into the wider educational community. So this approach needs to be plausible. It needs to make sense even to those who might ultimately reject it.

## Revolution 2: Serious, positive engagement with the curriculum

Christian educators need to engage seriously and positively with the curriculum. It is important in the refining of the curriculum documents that an appropriate balance is found and maintained between what is important for us as a nation and what is important for each school and teacher to deliver.

In our responses to the National Curriculum, our arguments should be restricted to major issues of principle, which if implemented, would cause us to compromise our allegiance to Jesus Christ or get in the way of our practice of a legitimate Christian approach. Let others pursue the issues of preference and taste, the addition of this piece of content, the omission of something else but let us address the big issues of principle.

Though we are Christians, we live, work, lead and teach in a fallen world, a world of competing ideologies, a world of education and scholarship that is pluralistic in the best sense of the word, and in which a modernist or post-modernist view of the world is pervasive.

It is important that the curriculum supports the spirit of curiosity, the promotion of humility in the

face of the abundance of what we do not know. It is critical that the quantity and complexity of what is included in each syllabus does not impede students' acquiring a life-long love of learning, a warm and respectful relationship with each of their teachers, and a positive disposition towards exploring God, His world, His revelation of Himself, and the purpose for which we have been created. In particular it ought not to be what we censor that distinguishes our schools from others, but how we address what is prescribed for us.

## Revolution 3: Holistic integrative thinking and speaking about truth in the disciplines

One of the features that distinguishes Christian schools per se, from say Anglican schools generally, is the use of language such as 'the integration of Christian faith and learning'. By and large this sort of language does not appear in the publicity material for most Anglican schools, but it does appear in the prospectuses for many Christian schools. However, when it comes to examining what 'integration' means in practice, the differences between our schools are not so large. This occurs despite the vast amount of literature that has been written on the theory and the theology of integration, with these resources being accessible for many years.

This is a significant issue in its own right and I do not have time to develop it here. Suffice to say, a genuine integration of God's truth claims as revealed in the Bible and through Christ, together with the truth claims of each and every one of the academic disciplines studied in our schools, requires an intentional, thorough, accurate and carefully thought through understanding of biblical theology and doctrine, and an equally purposeful study and understanding of how academic knowledge claims are made, including the worldviews underlying those claims.

Christian teachers cannot hide behind rhetoric in this area. In fact, each needs to put behind them the fumbling, trivialised and often pious efforts of bygone decades and promote, practise and showcase radically different, holistic, integral approaches to thinking, teaching and learning. A revolution is needed in the way educators think and the way teachers speak and discuss this area of professional practice. It will manifest itself in a more authentic representation of Christian teachers as genuine educators and learners.

## Revolution 4. Deepening and broadening the knowledge base of all school staff

It follows, therefore, that every teacher Christian schools place in front of students needs to be as highly equipped in their knowledge and application of the Bible

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as they are in the subjects they teach. It is apparent that this goal, to bring their teachers up to a suitable benchmark of theological knowledge and commitment (as well as pedagogy), may place an onerous burden on many schools. But the price schools pay, and the price our students now and in the future will pay if educators don't do this, is much greater. It is reasonable to expect all of our teachers to be engaged in on-going personal and professional development. In typically Aussie style, educational administrators tend to say that this is a matter for each individual to determine.

The professional credibility of Christian schools is a communal matter. All teachers need to be true life-long learners for the sake of the body to which they belong. Lifelong learning is integral to life in God's kingdom. Personal advice offered to people suggests, "In God's new world all will be engaged in gifted and talented programs and applied biblical studies. Get used to it now, get hooked now."

This paper flags the importance of Christian schools taking a more proactive role in deepening and broadening the skills and knowledge base of all of their staff, and doing everything they can to facilitate it. Just think how far \$2million per school could have gone if it had been applied to this instead of to bricks and mortar!

How important an investment is your school or the schools you know making in this area? When the going gets tough, is it your professional development budget that is the first to be slashed? How strategic is your deployment of time and money in regards to professional development?

## Revolution 5. Succession planning for leadership in education

In Anglican schools across Australia, as no doubt in other sectors, many school leaders will retire over the next five years. There is no shortage of literature in this country and overseas recounting the reluctance of good teachers to put their names forward to lead big schools. Succession planning has never been done very well in Australia, and this also applies in our school sector.

Tomorrow's school leaders need more than school experience and secular higher education qualifications. In my view, they need applied theological training so that they can exercise the ministry to their staff (and students) that the churches are not able to directly offer. This presents as a major challenge because it is costly in terms of money and time, every school and current Head says they don't have enough of it, so it does not happen.

Our respective sectors are trying hard to identify, mentor, challenge and encourage aspiring leaders—not just for our own schools I hope, but for the whole range of schools. Our Diocese shares a particular

'heart' concern for our Christian brothers and sisters in government schools who need Christ-centred leadership development just as much, if not more, than the teachers in our own schools.

Unless educational systems invest more in the preparation of our future leaders, our schools will suffer badly.

It is apparent that schools are facing (and have been facing for some time) a desperate shortage of home-grown scholars in education who think, lecture, write and advocate Christianly.

- Where are our philosophers of education?
- Where are our outstanding leaders of education who also have a sound theological background and experience?
- Who is doing the seminal and scholarly thinking about education?
- Who can take on the pragmatists and reductionists at their own game?
- Where are the career paths in Australia for a teacher in your school who aspires to pursue a PhD or an EdD in education and theology?

In September last year Archbishop Peter Jensen delivered the Isaac Armitage Lecture in which he asked the question: "Is there such a thing as Anglican education?" "If there is," he asked, "where is the literature, what are its foundations and how is it manifested in Anglican schools?" Out of this has grown a small think tank of theologians, educators, academics and others who have been charged with the responsibility of writing a seminal book, creating a 'school of thought' that forms the basis for a more conscious, rigorous biblically-based philosophy and practice in education. This initiative is being supported by a serious campaign to encourage a score of our best thinkers and teachers to undertake postgraduate study/research. Schools and school systems have a lot of catching up to do.

## Revolution 6: Purposeful recruitment of Christians to teaching

There are about 279,000 teachers in Australian schools. It is predicted that over the next five years, 110,000 of these will resign or retire. It is the policy (and an assumed practice) of many of the schools in the Christian school sector to employ only committed Christians, or at least to give preference to the employment of Christians. This practice has been facilitated in some jurisdictions by an exemption from certain anti-discrimination laws. A review of current trends in policy and practice suggests a concern that these concessions will not last forever.

For over five years the Anglican Diocese of Sydney has been actively promoting teaching as a worthy and strategic vocation for Christians. The first three years were focused primarily on senior

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students in government and independent schools as well as students in University. For the past two years this initiative was shared with teachers and potential career changers. The Diocese employs a full time person, Ian Keast, as the Director of the Christians in Teaching Project. Other non-government and government schools have benefitted, perhaps even more than Anglican schools, from Ian's tireless efforts. The need to recruit more educators who are highly competent, enthusiastic, mission-oriented, Bible-believing Christians into teaching, the leadership positions in schools, and for that matter into tertiary education institutions, is taken seriously. If it is important that the students in our schools are taught by committed Christian teachers then there is a need to expand our collective efforts to put before Christians the challenge and opportunity of teaching.

## **Revolution 7: School operation justifies only employing Christian teachers**

But more needs to be done than that, and that's where the revolution comes into it. There is a need to conduct our schools in such a way that justifies the claim that only committed Christians can do the job. That is to say, unless a Christian approach to teaching (and pastoral care and relationship building) is adopted in which there is such an authentic integration of faith with learning that only a Bible-believing and practising (applying) Christian with the requisite quality professional knowledge and competence can do the teaching, schools forfeit the right to the exemption from anti-discrimination laws associated with religious observance. If all Christian schools want is teachers who are caring and work as professionals and don't deliberately undermine what the schools are about, then why should these schools claim to only want to employ committed Christians?

Let it also be understood, that just because a teacher professes to be a Bible-believing Christian does not guarantee for one minute that they think, live, speak and teach in an authentic Christian way.

## **Revolution 8: Working, praying, standing and acting together**

There is a final revolution which all of the foregoing points put together require. It is an outcome that our minds will tell us should be promoted, but our hearts and hands might take longer to embrace. Almost every one of the exhortations referred to above impacts in some way on each of our constituencies.

It is readily recognised that there are still lots of misperceptions, misunderstandings, distrust, prejudice and stereotypes held amongst Christian educators, of each other. Sometimes these go back generations and need to be debunked. Different organisations have their own histories and these must be respected. However, it is very important that Christian educators work together, pray together, stand together and where possible act together. At the same time they need to encourage spiritual brothers and sisters who are striving to serve as modern-day Daniels in government schools. In many cases, they do not have around them supportive and praying Christians. To do less is to squander the opportunities and resources God has given to us.

Putting all these challenges together establishes an agenda for change that is much larger than Kevin Rudd could ever imagine. At the heart of our revolution (or all eight of them) is the need for authenticity and integrity. Christian educators cannot, in honesty before our Lord, whose claims on followers are total, pretend to be about His work in education and not subject all that is done to His Lordship. **TEACH**

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