

Shaping our children's future

Current and past trends

Michael Lynch

The work environment that students leaving school will enter in the latter part of the nineties and the next decade is radically different to that in previous times. The skills that employers require of their staff imply certain teaching and facilitation approaches that are currently not seen as core in some Australian States. This article examines the needs of the 'virtual workplace', and the current pressures and job requirements that are imposed on young people, and highlights the values acquisition areas for youth and how the clarification of values sets is an important role for educational institutions

The world that adolescents find themselves in today is one that offers many challenges, both positive and negative. The opportunities that are presented to them can lead them onto paths that will open out the whole world to them or else close them into narrow alleyways of oppression, illness and lack of self worth.

Like all of us, young people are not one dimensional. They are made up of the interaction of a number of factors that can be illustrated by the Mandala of Public Health (see Figure 1).

Hancock and Perkins (1985) state that the mandala is a circular symbol of the universe with all of the impacts on the individual in the centre shown by the rings and circles around that person. All of these areas affect the final values systems and perceptions of the person. The family and community are shown as extremely important as it is these areas that often shape the first drifts towards the personality and values of the individual. It also points to the idea that the number of experiences and contacts that person has in their early life, create the adult and affect the way they deal with the larger circles, biosphere, culture and community. Although a concept used in the early stages of health promotion work and a product of its times (early 1980s), it is still a useful model to view the complex interactions that impact on young people today.

Only a generation ago, the number of options that were available to young people were limited – the school they went to was the one likely to be near their home, the subjects they attended

were often decided by the school, the jobs they then took up depended on their schooling and socio-economic status, and that job was often the one for life and may have been in the same area as their relatives. They usually retired at 65 and settled into a steady decline in productiveness. It may not be the most pretty of pictures with the greatest degree of stimulation, but it was relatively predictable.

Even more importantly, the choices may have been narrow, but the work options upon leaving school and when they could leave were much more accessible and varied than today (Australian Government 1994). The balance between the aspects of adolescents' lives, such as leisure, recreation, work and play were controlled by the system they were in. This meant that they had fewer choices than today, but it could be argued that they also had less stress because of that, and they had health prescribed through that system. Children were allowed to act as such for a longer period of time. It may have been a removal of their basic rights for control over their lives, but the decisions that needed to be made, such as choice of career, relationships, travel, and accommodation, could be put off until they were more 'mature'.

Their values systems were also prescribed for them in most cases through the mores of the society they lived in. It may have been from a religious base or those of their parents or their older workmates. Values also were not put up for question as, with most adolescents, they wished to conform rather than question. It was not until the late 1960s that young people

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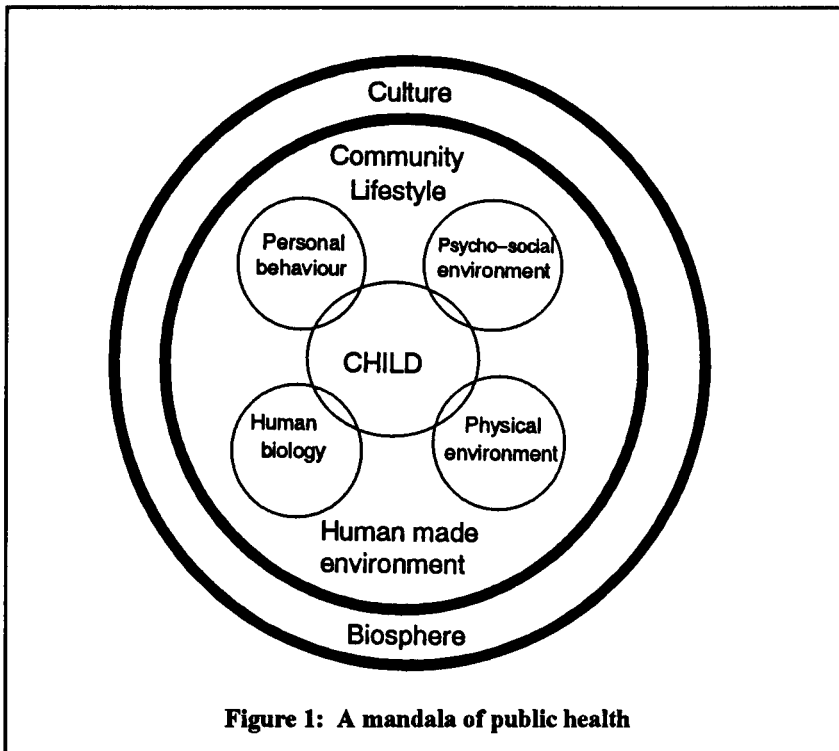


Figure 1: A mandala of public health

began to see that they had 'rights' and started to express themselves as different to their parents (Mackay 1993).

In the mid 1960s nearly two-thirds of 15-19 year olds had full time jobs and under a quarter completed secondary school. Today less than one in five teenagers hold a full time job and more than three-quarters complete secondary school (Australian Government 1994:89).

As young people progressed through their formative years, they were able to leave school at a number of points – many completed primary school, or up to level 8 in today's terms, and then entered the work force. It may not have been a highly paid or highly skilled job, but it placed them in the world of adults at a reasonably young age and allowed them to begin a modelling process based on the older people around them. At this stage, or at the intermediate certificate (around level 10), they were able to take up an apprenticeship, again putting them in contact with a 'mentor', an older person from whom the adolescent could learn. This situation has again changed. The number of first year apprentices in 1993 was 46% less than in May 1989. Only 15.4% of all apprentices were aged 15-17 years,

compared to 29.2% in 1988 (Castles 1993:1-2).

Students could leave at 'leaving' (level 11) or matriculation (level 12) and also be assured of a reasonable job. In May 1993, almost three-quarters of all 15-19 year olds attended either school or tertiary institutions, and the vast majority did so on a full time basis (Castles 1993).

Throughout the teenage years, when it can be argued that a great number of the values that will be held as adults are formed, these individuals were exposed to the workforce and an adult society. They had a chance to see other value systems in action, especially some that were used by people who were older than themselves. They had the chance to try and fail in a number of areas within the protective shell of the adults around them. It may be argued that they were cocooned by this shell and not allowed to develop their own perspectives, but they were at least going through an 'initiation' process that allowed them to view society and have some impact on it through their work. Many societies have this initiation as a path to adulthood and it marks the acceptance of them into the broader 'club' of other initiates. It gives them the values set

that they may use for the rest of their lives.

Today this is missing. Children are being socialised by their schools, because, as has been illustrated, most adolescents are at school during these formative phases, with little direct contact with adults, other than their teachers and parents. The contact that they do have with older society is not on an intimate basis where they see adults interacting with each other through various tasks and problems, where they could see the adults' values in action, but rather at a distance, and through a power 'block'. The power block is one where they are in a subservient role to the adult and could be said to be powerless. How many teachers and parents practice 'empowerment'?

If contact with adults and work itself is seen as an important part of the socialisation process for adolescents, then what is happening today?

WORK TODAY

In a study by Daniel and Cornwall (1993), it was found that young people's hopes focussed on securing good jobs, the education and training needs for these, and eventually, a satisfactory way of life and family. Full time paid employment remained a fundamental prerequisite to achieve self esteem, identity and security. Work was clearly viewed as the entry into adult life and financial security

In January 1993 youth unemployment for 15-19 year olds was 26%.

PART TIME WORK

What is happening is that due to economic pressures, many adolescents are entering the workforce as part time employees. Although full time opportunities fell for 15-24 year olds between 1970 and 1993, the share of part time employment undertaken by teenagers rose from 9% in 1970 to about 16% in 1993 (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993:40).

A corollary of the loss of full time work opportunities for young people is that those who have managed to find their way into the labour force are often in part time and casual jobs where they are more economically and industrially vulnerable.

Part time work for students is very widespread, and is largely concentrated in the sales and basic manual labour occupations, especially in retail trading. In a typical year, about 60% of school students aged 15 and over would have undertaken some part time work for typically eight hours per week. However, high unemployment turnover means that, at any one time, approximately 25% of all school students are unemployed (Castles 1993).

A reduction in the number of lower level unskilled positions in the service sector, previously held by female school leavers, and in the number of trade and labouring jobs, have also contributed to the contraction of the youth labour market.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HEALTH PROBLEMS

At a time when self identity is being forged, it is not surprising that the absence of work causes a variety of social and psychological difficulties. Work is fundamental to what we grow up 'to be'. Social research internationally has consistently found an inexorable link between unemployment and the emergence of personal problems.

Social research on the difficulties encountered by unemployed people has pointed to a range of social and economic difficulties including lowered self-identity, depression, bewilderment, social isolation and despair. In terms of health consequences, unemployed people report diminished levels of psychological health and well being in comparison with their employed counterparts (Graetz 1992).

Graetz (1992) argues that school leavers who end up in unsatisfactory jobs are no better off, and in fact worse off, than their counterparts who fail to find work.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS OF PAST ACTIONS

...young people bear the brunt of social change. And in doing that, they provide the most sensitive measure of the pressure and tensions building up in society. (Eckersley 1988)

The need to become increasingly competitive on some international markets (while being locked out of others), new technology and the push for higher productivity arising from its use, have meant that many kinds of jobs that were abundant only five years ago no longer exist. This feature of restructuring has been particularly severe in areas where young people traditionally found their first jobs. That is, entry points into the workforce for young people have been severely curtailed.

Global changes in the nature and structure of employment have radically altered the pattern of work in Australia. In the near future, employment will be characterised by:

- a greater disparity between those in the highest paid jobs and those in the lowest paid, often casual jobs;
- more people moving in and out of casual and part time work and social security benefits;
- a trend for new, permanent, full time jobs to be lower paid jobs.

Gregory (1992) states that if the linear trends of the last two decades continues, then in the year 2001:

- there will be no full time job opportunities for 15-19 year old females and full time employment for young males will disappear if ... apprenticeships are no longer based on full time employment;
- Full time employment opportunities for 20-24 year old males will fall another 16%;
- Between the ages of 15 and 24 years, young people will spend an average of 20 months searching for full time employment.

Australia has the sixth highest rate of suicide for 15-19 year olds in the industrial world.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 'ideal manager'

	% responses 'essential' category
People skills	75%
Strategic thinker	58%
Visionary	52%
Flexible and adaptable to change	50%
Self management	33%

Table 2: Trends with most significant impact

Globalisation	61%
Technological change	51%
'Flattening' of organisations	32%
Changing, more turbulent environment	27%
Changing workforce expectations	25%
Emphasis on quality	22%
Changing demographics	20%
Rise of the global village	12%

THE FUTURE OF WORK AND WORKERS - THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE¹

Are schools and the overall environment that young people find themselves in actually preparing them for the 'workforce' of the future? In a recent study of business executives who are planning their workforces for the future (McFarlane 1996), certain characteristics were shown to be essential for the ideal manager (see Table 1).

In the same study, trends with the most significant impact on managers of the future were elucidated (see Table 2).

Both these results show that the manager of the virtual organisation of the future needs people skills above all and that they need to be flexible enough

¹ Virtual workplace refers to a future construct where the 'usual' office structure is replaced by a combination of home work, office work and electronic communication through a global environment.

in their approaches to move with the changing work environment.

In the past, skills were highly divided between the worker and the management. Traditional managers of traditional organisations needed a set of skills, some of which are identified below:

- Labour should be divided into discreet units that tackle set parts of a process;
- There should be a clear allocation of authority;
- There should be a single command structure;
- There should be unity of direction so that it does not pull in many different directions at once;
- The organisation should be centrally controlled; and
- There should be a clear hierarchy existing within an organisation in order to create control.
(Forbes 1990:13)

Davidow and Malone (1992) challenge the suitability of these principles in today's environment when they state:

...the system of the past which was so effective for a static environment of mass production, will be a disaster in the fast moving world of the virtual corporation' (Davidow & Malone 1992:4).

The implication here is that there is a cost of wasting time, due to the slowness of approval in a traditional hierarchical structure. As organisations are forced to rationalise, in an effort to become more effective, managers are concurrently having to change their focus from 'directing action to ensuring the smooth process of management' (Davidow & Malone 1992:1). For this to be a successful initiative empowerment and trust of the workforce are crucial.

McGregor's work in the mid 1960s complements this idea by suggesting that some people within organisations actually enjoyed taking responsibility. He found that the design of organisational structures needed to focus on the ability of a group to:

- cover whole tasks;
- be self regulating;

- be an optimal size for the tasks it must perform;
- have minimal differences in status within the group; and
- have groups running in parallel so as to enable members to move sideways if they desire (McGregor 1967).

Therefore, the structures that support an organisation should no longer be rigorously tailored to the traditional functions of production and administration but could actually be designed to accommodate changing markets and the changing needs of the staff.

Again this means that the student of today needs to start developing these skills.

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SELF MANAGEMENT

The main consequence of organisational restructuring and changes to traditional hierarchies will be the need for workers to be involved in the decision-making processes previously controlled by management. A cornerstone of the virtual corporation, this sharing of power will be the most sensitive area to change and where true 'culture change' will be focused. It has implications not only for the way we go about our work, but for the way we organise our whole economy, for social relations and structures, for education, training, and unionism.

In a flattened structure, where 'remaining managers will be forced to assume a much greater span of control' (Davidow & Malone 1992:6) workers will automatically have greater

autonomy. With the reduction in direct supervision, the formation of teams as work units and regulatory bodies will eventuate. Within these teams workers will need to be given authority to make decisions about the work processes to be used, the allocation of resources, training, the regulation of mutual relations, marketing and the distribution of income.

Interpersonal or team skills will become the tools of the workplace that will allow staff to be retrained into different jobs. The employer of the virtual corporation will expect these skills to be already present in the prospective employee. The approaches that were used to gain jobs in the past (regurgitation of a body of knowledge, facts and figures, passing various courses) will not be necessary. The corporation itself will train its workers to fit the jobs it requires.

The imperative for such empowerment comes essentially from the need to adapt to changing economic circumstances:

The virtual corporation will have many products with short life cycles. The decision of how to respond to a rapidly changing market can best be made by the individuals closest to the action (Davidow & Malone 1992:4).

The acceptance that workers are best placed to make decisions implies the belief that workers have the capacity and skill to assume such control. In doing so it adds support to McGregor's stance in his Theory Y that 'in most work organisations the ability of most employees are only partially utilised' (Dunford 1992:78).

To effectively bring about a high degree of worker self-management, management will need to put much effort into retraining workers. However, unlike traditional retraining, which narrowly focuses on the acquisition of new technical skills, retraining for the virtual corporation needs to be broader. It will of course include the technical skills required but it must also look to developing the capacities of people to develop more creative approaches to the way work is undertaken.

More multi-skilling and group training will be required to produce a highly skilled and adaptable work force.

Interpersonal and team skills for working together will also become crucial. Some of these will emerge out of necessity but that will not be enough. As Kanter says, 'Declaring people a "team" does not automatically make them one' (Dunford 1992:119). Many workers will have difficulty adjusting to new work relationships. Focused training on such areas as planning, decision making and communication skills will be needed.

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So the workers of the future will need to take much more responsibility for their own work and also then will need a set of generic skills that allow them to 'get on' with others. This is the major focus of education for the future. It is instilling or maintaining the search for 'meaning' or that inquisitiveness that exists in the young child and is slowly removed through the schooling process as it currently exists.

THE NECESSARY APPROACH

The skills that were necessary to 'survive' in the world of the past (or at least the 1950s, '60s and '70s) are no longer valid. The question may be asked if they were ever important. The student

and soon-to-be active member of society needs to be able to interact with people on a number of levels. They need to develop people skills. They need to be flexible in their approach to life and be a problem solver rather than a reabsorber and regurgitator. 'Sponges' (Lynch 1990) who take in information and squeeze it back out again, without any change will not be employable. The ability to hold a body of knowledge that they gain in school and then use after they leave is no longer acceptable. At the moment, the volume of knowledge in the world doubles every 3 to 5 years (Moss Kanter 1992). This means that the texts and information that the students are getting now will be obsolete before they leave school. As said earlier, employers need workers who can be continually retrained and take responsibility for their learning. The number of influences that students will be exposed to throughout their school career and later in life means that they need to be able to discriminate the good from the bad, the right from the wrong and add these pieces of life knowledge to their own values sets. In order to do this, they need to be able to establish their own values and see that others may have different values to theirs that are just as legitimate. As the places where young people spend most of their time, schools and the home need to be able to assist them in their search for values and a path through life. More than ever, values clarification and life skill training are crucial, more so than other forms of so called 'core curricula'. □

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