

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Issues that affect Young People



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This is the text of an address given by David Scott to the Children's Bureau Luncheon on the 21st June, 1983, in Melbourne.

Mr. Scott is the Chairman of the Child Development and Family Services Council in Victoria. He was formerly the Director of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and a past President of the Australian Council of Social Services. He is the publisher of 'Australian Society'.

In this paper he identifies some of the signposts critical to the shape of services in the future.

I would like to consider some of the signposts that are around us that we are tending to ignore. They are signposts that are critical for people who are involved in working with children and young people, and who are concerned about unemployment and social change that affects the young. Despite our capacity to generate enormous knowledge in the physical and social sciences, we ignore many of the signposts. Some of them are quantitative and some of them are qualitative.

First, look at the assumption that underlies the work of all your organisations. It is that the way in which people grow up depends very much on the kind of upbringing and the environment that they have experienced in their childhood. Accepting this assumption, let us look at some of the changes that are going to occur in the not too distant future.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that the population of Australia will reach 22 million by the year 2020. It sounds a long time away but we are moving progressively in the direction of an enormous increase in population.

Significantly, the average age of our population will increase from 29 to 38. But perhaps the most important signpost of all is that the number of men over the age of 65 is going to double, and the number of women over the age of 65 will treble between now and then. As an aside, one wonders why the equal opportunity act would not have evened out these differences in life span.

For one aspect of service, provisions for elderly people, there is going to be an enormous increase in demand. And if

there is an increase in demand for services for one sector of the community it is usually more difficult to maintain the required resources for other sections of the community, in this instance children's services. A study in England has estimated that a couple who were married in 1920, and are 80 today, could expect to have 40 female relatives living, and 14 of those would not be working. The assumption is they could be helping that elderly couple.

People who married in 1950, when they reach the age of 80 will have only 11 females and only 3 not working. These are demographic signposts that point to an enormous increase in demand for service. Demographically there won't be many members of the extended family to support elderly people. Demand for service will be accentuated by the current trend of diminished responsibility by younger family members for the elderly.

Other signposts are the facts that 20% of families are headed by women and that there are some half a million children in single parent families. Many of you will remember the enormous impact that was made on child welfare policy 30 years ago by the publication of Bowlby's study "Child Care and the Growth of Love". That study showed the critical emotional importance of maternal love. To my knowledge there has not been the same emphasis on considering the effect on young children of growing up in families that are virtually fatherless.

Mothers may be far more important to children than fathers, but it is time we identified and looked at the impact that this trend is having when so many more children are growing up in families

where there is a part-time, a substitute or no father present.

Another fact that has enormous significance that we have not started to appreciate is that in Australia today there are 700,000 young children who are growing up in families where the parents are dependent on income security payments of one kind or another. Not only does that mean that they are growing up in families with incomes that are on, below or just above the poverty line, but they are growing up in homes where there is no work role model. There is nobody going out each day and doing something called work, and coming home and talking about it.

What sort of attitude towards work, what interest and motivation towards higher education or employment will those children have? I don't know the answers, but it is time we started to explore some of these because they have great impact for the future of those young people who have grown up in families where income to support them and their parent or parents arrives in the form of a social security cheque over long periods of time.

There are also very important qualitative changes taking place. One is argued in a recent book called "The Disappearance of Childhood" by an American, Neil Postman. He says that in the Middle Ages there was really no such identified period seen as childhood. If you look at a Breghele painting, you see that everything that happens in the community occurs in front of children and children were part of all that took place.

With the invention of printing and with it education, we start to separate off those early years from adulthood.



Children have to go through school and be educated before they become adults. Also, somewhere along the way, adults decided that some of the things they did with one another and some things they did in the community should not be seen or known about until children reached a certain age. Childhood is of fairly recent origin. It flourished in the latter part of the last century, when we did away with the exploitation of children. In fact, most of the children 100 years ago would have been regarded as at risk by today's standards.

The point that Postman is making is that all this has disappeared very dramatically with the advent of television. Television takes us back to the days of Breughel's village. As soon as a child can understand language at six or seven he or she can see on that screen everything that is happening in the world and that experience is shared with the adults of the family. This tends to devalue education because children and young people feel that they know everything. There are now no secrets. The curiosity of children tends to be replaced by cynicism or arrogance. They know everything. Nothing is mysterious any longer. Postman argues that new technology is really sowing the seeds of the destruction of education over a long period of time and childhood is disappearing.

In America, children's games and children's clothing is disappearing. Children now use the good and bad language of adults. It is also reflected in the United States, and here, the increase

of juvenile crime and all the other ways in which young people behave like adults.

There are now two conceptions of children's rights. The first is that the children's rights movement should protect children, and there is a case for public intervention if children are seeming to be harmed. The other notion of rights supports the idea that childhood is an oppressive idea. Children should be regarded as young adults. This has a certain force behind it as we are beginning to see in Australia.

This leads onto concern in the last year or two about below retention rates in secondary education. Why do so many young people leave school? One would expect them to continue for as long as they could. Every survey shows the longer you stay at school the more likely you are to get a job and the more likely you are to get the sort of job you want. Yet students are still leaving school in droves. The 250 million dollars spent on school-to-work transitions since 1979 has had little impact on the school retention rate.

What people are missing is what Postman has recognised. The 15 or 16 year olds of today are superficially mature. In their own eyes they know what the world is all about.

Postman also comments on the way in which children absorb a picture of the world through television. They learn about the world in 30 second news snippets. The other way they learn about the world is through the advertisements, and Postman gives interesting examples of the morality which seems to come through the commercials, whereas the rest of the world and what happens in it, with emphasis on violence and destruction, is threatening. The commercials present the parable of the girl with bad breath. She discovered Listerine and she finished up honeymooning in Hawaii. Or the parable of the man who lost his express card and was saved by American Express.

This artificial sense of maturity is why so many young people want to leave school as soon as they can. Secondary schooling should be made interesting and purposeful, but we cannot expect it to do something that is really beyond its capacity. Young people reach a certain stage where they will not accept the educational atmosphere of secondary schools. This does not mean that they will not come back to education.

One issue we are neglecting at the moment is the horrendous unemployment figure of 30% of 15 - 19 year olds unemployed. This is a far higher figure than any country in the Western world. We are ignoring the fact that young people want to come back to work.

They leave school believing they will get work. They want to get to the head of the queue. If they don't they become unemployed or they get the dead-end jobs, which they find frustrating. For many there is then the motivation to get back into education. We should invest greatly increased resources into improving the re-entry possibilities into education. TEAS allowances must be raised. Nobody can live on TEAS for 3 years if they have no other support.

We need to expand TOP programs that enable young people to qualify for tertiary education. They are heavily over-subscribed and they are dreadfully under-resourced.

There is also a need to rationalise unemployment benefit, TEAS allowance, secondary school allowance and family allowance, so that they do not influence young people to make decisions that are not in their best interests.

Another development that should be supported by those who work with young people is the introduction of job creation schemes.

They can be targeted to provide jobs for the disadvantaged who are not likely to obtain jobs if the economic situation does improve. Even if a job does not continue, the experience of having worked and earned for 6 or 12 months provides a unique experience. It also politicises young people in the sense that they are more likely to demand jobs once they know the benefits of a good income and have enjoyed the satisfactions as well as the dissatisfactions of working.

Job creation programs should also encourage participants to re-enter education and training and the courses they may enrol in should be enriched with subjects that help all in tertiary education to adapt to a world in which people will spend less of their lifetime in work, whether it be through a shorter working day or week, or through long or short periods of unemployment and much earlier retirement.

It is important that we try to anticipate and influence these and other changes rather than confining our work and responsibility to helping to deal with the consequences of change.

