Schooling and Enterprise Culture in Australia: Pause for a Critical Policy Analysis

John Smyth

Professor of Teacher Education

and

Director

Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching

Flinders University of South Australia

> **. . . there can hardly be a school, hospital, social services department, university or college in the UK that has not in some way become permeated by the language of enterprise. Enterprise has remorselessly reconceptualized and remodelled almost everything in its path (DuGay & Salaman, 1992, p. 622)**

Introduction

This paper argues that the recent emergence of enterprise education as a category in Australia (a notion that has been around for some considerable time elsewhere) has taken on all of the characteristics in the Australian context of what Stronach & Morris (1994) call "policy hysteria". It is argued that enterprise education in this particular reincarnation is more symbolic than substantive, and as an example of school reform and innovation in teaching, it is positioned as a rhetorical manoeuvre designed to relocate 'the problem' of the youth labour market in schools. The alleged benefits of enterprise teaching and learning are much extolled by policy entrepreneurs, but remain still largely untested at the level of the school and beyond. While much has been written on this topic in the UK over the past decade (see Keat & Abercrombie, 1991), it may be sanguine to stop and ask "what has been learned?" as another country goes down the policy borrowing track. As Australia increasingly gears up to follow the UK experiment of the "youth enterprise years of the 1980s" (MacDonald, 1991, p. 267) it makes some sense to take careful stock of what has been achieved in a context that has been characterised by a lack of "critical assessment of outcomes of all this endeavour" (MacDonald, 1991, p. 267).

It is important that I say something at the outset about the status and nature of this paper. It is not a paper that explores empirically the issue of enterprise education -- rather, it is a polemical, initial and tentative exploration of a policy category, and as such poses questions more than it provides definitive answers as to what this policy initiative is up to. The paper is part of a larger project in progress entitled "Schooling and Enterprise Culture", and later papers will take up the effects of enterprise education on curriculum, teachers' work, and the silences in respect of class gender, race, sexuality and ethnicity, and what a socially critical reconfiguration of enterprise education might look like. But, for the moment, however, I believe it is important to open up the category to critical interrogation.

Where this paper strikes out and takes a different position is in arguing that enterprise education may be part of the 'problem' rather than the 'solution'. In other words, enterprise education is being used as a kind of ideological hook with which to draw us into believing that the way out of the now universal youth crisis (Shuttleworth, 1993) in which young people leave school unable to secure jobs, is through having them develop the necessary personal and collective aptitudes, values and dispositions through projects that claim to stress innovation, partnerships with industry, networking, vocational education programs, and acquiring enterprising skills, knowledge and behaviours. Re-defining the problem in a way that personalises and individualises it, takes the pressure off the collective need to creatively theorise and think about what is happening to the nature of work, the predatory nature of the transglobal forces producing these changes, and the abdication of the state in enacting a proper steering role in the economy. The paper suggests that preparing youth for enterprising forms of self-employment (which is where much of the emphasis appears to be put), may be tantamount to leading them down yet another cul-de-sac towards degraded labour.

The policy issue

When it is stripped to its essentials, it is clear that the policy imperative behind the thrust for an enterprise culture in schooling is to create an ethos and a climate in schools that is likely to make students more amenable to the values of business, industry and the economy in general (see Shuttleworth, 1993 as an illustration of this). There is widespread feeling that schools have for too long been insulated from business and industry, and as a consequence, have let the economy down by not inculcating appropriate values of diligence, obedience, hardwork, compliance, and an acquisitive approach to life in general. The way to rectify this, so it is argued, is for schools to take on in a direct and concerted way, the creation of an approach to curriculum, pedagogy and schooling that will de-emphasise an ethic of caring and substitute in its place a virtuous concern for the acquisitive.

The seminal document on the issue of schooling, youth and enterprise culture is: "Towards an 'enterprising' culture" (OECD/CERI, 1989), and it goes to considerable lengths to try and make the distinction between what it considers to be 'narrow' and a 'broad' definition of what is meant by 'being enterprising'. According to the document, in its positive format, it means: "having the ability to be creative and flexible, to be able to take and exercise initiative and responsibility, and to be able to solve problems" (p.5). The document approvingly cites the president of SONY corporation who argued that these are the same qualities required by adaptable businesses: "flexible, adaptable, creative and responsible workers" (p.5). It also makes reference to the Hon John Dawkins when he was Australian Minister for Employment, Education and Training, when he said that social and economic change was dependent upon:

> . . . the introduction of new methods to enable the development of skills and
> attitudes which equip the workforce and society more generally to adapt to

and influence change, including qualities such as the habit of learning, curiosity, creativity, initiative, teamwork and personal responsibility . . . (p.6).

The document then attempts to make a distinction in terms of the way the word "enterprise" is used:

> One which can be termed a "narrow" one, regards enterprise as business entrepreneurialism, and sees its promotion and development within education and training systems as an issue of curriculum development which enables young people to learn, usually on an experiential basis, about business start-up and management. The second approach, which can be termed the "broad" one, regards enterprise as a group of qualities and competences that enable individuals, organisation, communities, societies and cultures to be flexible, creative and adaptable in the face of, and as contributors to, rapid social and economic change (pp. 6-7).

The OECD document re-iterates what it regards as its fundamental departure from the business management terminology, again:

> Its focus is not therefore about learning about entrepreneurialism (as in the "narrow" approach) but about personal development (p.7).

The problem with this kind of bifurcated distinction between allegedly "narrow" and "broad" definitions is that they demonstrably fail to acknowledge that no matter how widely they attempt to cast their net, they nevertheless both emerge out of what is essentially the same crucible -- features of "adaptability", "creativity", "responsibility", "curiosity", "teamwork" and the like, are unswervingly oriented to, and ultimately committed to serving the interests of business, albeit through some intervening process of "personal development". We are supposed to believe that as long as youth are not actually conscripted to industry and commerce, then we have effectively taken on some fundamentally different meaning of the term enterprise. Placing greater "responsibility on the learner" and having teachers who are "facilitat[ors] rather than instruct[ors]" is not necessarily an approach likely to separate it from its supposedly business counterpart. It is quite conceivable that we can still have an approach to schooling that serves the interest of the corporate sector even with a heavy reliance on all of the supposedly personal qualities listed above. So, the argument is not about broad versus narrow definitions of the term, but about the unasked (and therefore unanswered question) of "whose interests are served?"

A Social Pathology View of Enterprise

From a policy perspective the notion of enterprise as a category is disturbing because of its perjorative and ameliorative connotations. While it masquerades and wraps itself up as if it were value neutral and concerned only with improving the life chances of children in schools that are "at risk", it could be argued that as a discourse this is in need of serious interrogation. Enterprise has become a code word in which the policy assumptions that lie behind it have gone largely unexamined. As a category it obfuscates more than it informs largely because it brings with it the implication that somehow certain categories of children and their families are at risk of falling through the economic safety net and they have to be "saved". The problem is constructed as an absence within certain individuals of enterprising skills -- in this respect it is likely gendered, racist, and classist. There is an inherent presumption deeply entrenched in common sense, that children who come from areas of poverty, from backgrounds of disadvantage, from working class families, are aboriginal, or come from Non-English speaking origins -- all come from an underclass that is deficient, and that enterprise programs funded by governments or industry that improve their skills and

competencies will somehow catapult them out of these categories. This "liberal friends of the poor" (Reed, 1992) view serves to perpetuate a policy perspective in which the victims continue to be blamed and the 'solution' is constructed around age-old fallacies.

The problem to which enterprise culture purports to be the answer, presumes attitudinal, dispositional and behavioural defects in the lives and backgrounds of certain groups who need resuscitating in order to gain a toe-hold in the economy. By quarantining the problem in this ways so that it becomes an issue of 'kids from poor backgrounds who can't get jobs', the social pathology view of enterprise culture locates the problem with individuals, rather than focus on the social and economic structures of society that produce and maintain inequality. While the problem is portrayed predominantly as an individual one, schools are regarded as being partly to blame because of a failure to inculcate an appropriate curriculum, vocational skills, attitudes and dispositions. Behind this kind of rhetoric and the ideology that accompanies it, is a fundamental misrepresentation of who is at risk and for what reasons. Constructing the problem as if it were the problems of schools and their inhabitants is yet another instance of a "discourse of despair" (Fine, 1993) on the part of economic and privileged interests who are able to construct and perpetrate the myth of poverty and lack of economic opportunity as residing in an underclass. Representing "at risk" groups in this way, and creating enterprising programs that purport to "fix' their circumstances is a "shaved and partial image" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), one that "typically strengthens those institutions and groups which have denied connection to and then promise to 'save' those [who are the object of attention]" (p. 8).

Something About the Policy Specific Context

In the Australian situation the enterprise culture policy manoeuvre has taken the form of a federal government initiative entitled "Enterprise Education in Schools Programme" organised through the Enterprise Education Reference Group of the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) with an initial grant of $Aus 3.4 million in 1995. This programme is being promoted by the Curriculum Corporation, a body "owned" by the State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education, and charged with facilitating curriculum development in schools. The Curriculum Corporation publishes regular newsletters on developments in enterprise education called ED-VENTURES. In its inaugural issue (Curriculum Corporation, 1997), the Corporation defined enterprise education as being:

> . . . directed toward achieving a learning culture which will result in greater numbers of students equipped and enthused to identify, create, initiate and successfully manage personal, business, work and community opportunties (p. 1).

In its attempt to be informative of this new government initiative which is being chanelled through state education departments, this brief article makes reference 15 times to the importance of "small businesses". The argument about the need to pursue enterprise culture in schools seems to hinge around the importance of people "working for themselves", of understanding "how small businesses operate", of how to "gain small business experience", and details "of enterprising projects involving business and students working together". Apart from the obvious exhortations, there seems to be no shortage of funds for sophisticated materials development, as the following list attests: an Enterprise Education Web site; a CD ROM "Making it Happen" (with support booklets - to be distributed free to every school in Australia); an Enterprise Education Awareness package; other books including, "Approaches to Enterprise Education", "Enterprising Activities for Secondary Schools", "Enterprising Activities for Primary Schools", and a "Professional Development Manual" (scheduled for 1999). There are launches of these materials at paces like the Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo

and the Grand Ballroom of the ANA Hotel. There are also a range of "Enterprise Days", "Enterprise Community Awards", a "Schools Industry Links Demonstration Project", other software packages, and an invitation to schools to register as an Enterprise Contact on the "Enterprise Education On-line Database".

In 1996-97 the Federal government allocated a futher $Aus12.45 million through the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism for the Innovative Culture Program, the goal of which is to "heighten understanding of the importance of innovative and enterprising behaviours to individual prosperity and business success . . . " (DETE Curriculum Exchange Web Site). South Australia, one of the smaller states, allocated $Aus8.8 million for 3 years commencing in 1997, to its version of enterprise education entitled "Ready, Set, Go".

Why is this an issue ?

It has not been hard to make the claim that economies like those of Australia and other western countries are in the economic predicament they are in because of the failure of schools. This ploy has been used endlessly, and with effect, in the past in relation to literacy and numeracy, and it is not hard to make the argument, and have it stick on this occasion, that an absence of an enterprising culture in schooling is tantamount to a collective act of economic sabotage. In other words, this kind of orientation to schooling is argued to be needed in order to successfully out-compete international competitors, quite apart from (and in addition to) levering up levels of literacy and numeracy. What gets lost in this kind of narrow utilitarian analysis is any sense that the problem is far wider and more complex than this -- massive restructuring of international capitalism lies at the heart of our apparent inability to compete, but these issues seem to be elided and relegated to the background.

It is important, however, to try and locate the meaning behind the term "enterprise" in order to ascertain what it stands for. Peters (1992) argues that in the current climate of winding back the welfare state, that the term "enterprise" (particularly when it is coupled with "culture") has become something of a rallying point, a vision, or an antidote for the "culture of dependency":

> The notion of 'enterprise culture', designed for a post-industrial economy of the 1990s can be seen in post-structural terms as the creation of a meta-narrative . . . a totalising and unifying story about the prospect of economic growth and development based on the triumvirate of science, technology and education (p. 2).

He says, "the word is used as a simple and popular substitute for 'business'" (p. 2). 'Enterprise' and 'enterprise culture' have become the code words as "the major signifiers of this new discourse" (p. 3) which originated in Britain under the conservatives and which has since been sustained and maintained by international organisations like the OECD. Education as a social democratic imperative concerned with social justice and equality of opportunity have "receded under the economic imperative" (Peters, 1992, p. 2) and a "new meta-narrative" has been constructed around a singe vision of "innovation, improvement and up-grading", "achieving more with less", "skills training", "efficiency", and the like.

The powerful part of all this is that it constitutes a "cultural reconstruction", a kind of "partnership in cultural engineering" (Peters, 1992, p. 4-5) designed to tackle the alleged "culture of dependency" by promoting forms of individualism based on "choice" and "greater self-responsibility" (p. 4):

> The task of constructing such a culture has involved remodelling institutions along commercial lines and encouraging acquisition and the use of enterprising qualities (p. 5).

The central motifs of this enterprising discourse within schooling, centres around several prominent themes:

> . . . the need for business to have a greater say in curriculum; sugestions for changes in the processes of teacher education and recruitment to better reflect the world of commerce and business; a variety of proposals for business-education partnerships . . . [and] emphasis on: performance output measurement . . . [and] opening up the education system to greater competition (Peters, 1992, p. 10).

Why is this being touted as a solution ?

With the almost complete collapse in recent years of the youth labour market, it is not difficult to make the case that schools are to blame for not having a curriculum relevant to the work lives of students. In particular, the argument is that if only a more relevant work-related curriculum were offered, then schools would be able to inculcate youth with values and assumptions that make them more attractive 'commodities' (sic) to business and industry. This may turn out to be quite a spurious argument, particularly in a context where it matters little what schools do because the bulk of new jobs are 'Macjobs' -- low skill, part-time, insecure, menial, service sector jobs. Part of the attractiveness of enterprise culture as a policy solution is that it deflects attention away from the real problem, which is a deindustrialization in the context of global restructuring and focuses attention instead on alleged individual deficits in need of remediation, and some of the evidence collected by MacDonald (1991) bears this out startlingly.

The idea that the massive de-industrialization of western economies can somehow be turned around or fixed if we direct educational aspirations inwards by suggesting that it is the responsibility of private individuals to secure a reasonable paying job, with reasonable prospects for a future, and an acceptable quality of worklife, is a huge sleight of hand. The only justification for the argument that there should be a shift from social to individual responsibility, is that governments have run out of political will and imagination.

If we are to search for the more proximal origins of this notion of the enterprising individual we need look to the actions of the Thatcher government. Whereas Thatcher's view of enterprising culture was inextricably linked to the political and the moral challenge supposedly posed by the "permissive and anti-enterprise culture fostered by social democratic institutions since 1945 . . . and the economic and moral regeneration" (DuGay, 1991, p. 45) required for restoration, the circumstances of the contemporary Australian context are somewhat more focussed. In the Australian case it seems that there is a "moral panic" (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994) of a different kind, located in the inability of the economy to provide meaningful and satisfying jobs for large numbers of school leavers. The response of government has been to deflect the problem back onto schools and individuals who are argued to not have the requisite qualities of "boldness, vigour, self-reliance, energy, and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals" (DuGay, 1991, p. 45). Enterpise education as it is being touted in Australia amounts to a re-packaging of earlier failed attempts at vocationalism and competencies, neither of which proved capable of 'fixing' underlying structural problems of de-industrialization, but instead made schools and students subservient to the ethos of business and the values of consumerism.

Another possible reading of this shift to enterprise culture in Australian schools lies in the government agenda of seeking to significantly change the nature of work. Australia like most other western countries is experiencing a shift in ideology to more flexible and wider forms of job specification, in local parlance called "multi-skilling", by placing the emphasis much more directly on individual responsibility and greater levels of self-management. DuGay (1991) put this must succinctly:

> The message is clear: the free ride is over, you're on your own. From now on it is up to individuals to secure their own future through their own efforts (p. 52).

Like governments around the world, the Australian government is a major player in supporting this shift in thinking about the nature of work.

What are the sobering lessons from the UK experience ?

The most imformative understandings of what happens when "thousands of millions of pounds were spent on an ideological project to transform the culture of education and training within the UK" (MacDonald, 1991) comes from a qualitative study of 100 18- to 25 year olds in the depressed area of Cleveland, Britain (MacDonald, 1991). This project focused on what happens to shool leavers when they established business ventures of their own, and while the emphasis was somewhat different to the Australian situation where students are still operating under the protection of the school in experiencing, documenting and evaluating what business is like, it is the direction in which this study points that is important. Contrary to the rosy picture so frequently painted by the zealots of enterprising culture, MacDonald (1991) found a uniformly depressing picture of reality relayed by young people who repeatedly reported "expectations of low financial rewards" (p. 258), "low pay and long hours" (p. 258), "insecurity of earnings, week by week and month by month" (p. 259), "unpredictability of work and income" (p. 259), "continuous uncertainty" (p. 260), working in situations of "complete isolation" and "continuous and considerable stress", even though there might be warm inner glows about the increased self-esteem of being self-employed. While the intent on this occasion had been to reduce unemployment and rejuvenate local economies, the reality fell a long way short of "budding entrepreneurs" and was far less exuberant and with a lot of "muddling along", "plugging away", and "plodding along" (p. 261). The overwhelming impression from the study was of a group of young people "weighed down by the pressures of day-to-day business survival" and the view that "success, if to come at all, was a long way off" (p. 265).

MacDonald (1991) characterised the young entrepreneurs he studied as falling into three groups -- "runners", "plodders", and "fallers":

> The first group ["runners"] (representing about one in ten) consisted of those who had businesses which appeared to be commercially viable, were soundly managed and likely to expand. The second group ["plodders"] (roughly seven out of ten) were running businesses on a shoe-string with little hope of expansion. This group were highly vulnerable to market failure and survived on the basis of hard work and low wages. The third group ["fallers"] (two in ten) had left enterprise culture after one or two years filled with disappointment and dismay. These experiences of enterprise are very much at odds with official rhetoric. MacDonald explains that such experiences are a necessary part of the market; most cannot succeed in the enterprise game by the very nature of the underlying economic rules (Peters, 1992, p. 6).

It seemed from the evidence of the study that the "runners" had all of the requisite qualities anyway, and would have succeeded regardless of encouragement from school or outside -- so in a sense, any programmatic activity was irrelevant for them. As MacDonald (1991) summarised the harsh reality of enterprise culture, most young people did not operate in a "shining, new, glamorous enterprise economy but 'just plod along' in a twilight world of casualised, peripheral, poorly paid work" (p. 267). As Rees (1986) put it:

> . . . what we are seeing is a further segmentation of the labour market, with the ranks of those in the low paid, insecure, prospectless secondary labour market being swelled by a new breed of casual labour, the 'self-employed'. This is a far cry from the economic miracle anticipated through the rebirth of Britain's 'enterprise culture' (p. 20).

The Australian experience for students of "being enterprising" whether that be through "making bow ties", "beekeeping", "herb and vegetable gardens", "running a catering facility", "publishing eco-tourism information", or whatever other contrived activity, is unlikely to be that much different from the uniformily depressing realities of small businesses as decribed by school leavers in MacDonald's study.

What is clearly overlooked in the rush to find solutions to complex problems like these, is any real attempt to either understand the complexity of the issue or to use schools to expose students as prospective entrepreneurs to the reality of the highly predatory nature of the market -- rather, the rationale is pitched and left at the level of autonomy, competition, and the supposed lifeline to a miraculous (but mostly unattainable) future.

What is there to be worried about in this policy manoeuvre ?

The coupling of schools to the economy in this way has a long history that has been of concern to educators, mainly because of the impoverishment that a strictly vocational orientation produces. The push to include within schooling an explicit part of the curriculum which is directly connected to promoting business values, ought to be a source of some considerable alarm. There are several cogent reasons for this:

> (i) this is process of deliberately narrowing the curriculum down to serve the interests of a particular sectional group; where would such a process stop if allowed to go unchecked, given what we know about the power of dominant viewpoints ?;

> (ii) there is a distinct danger that if we are not extremely careful that eulogising business values will mean the extirpation of processes likely to be critical of this perspective in schools, especially in the crowded curriculum;

> (iii) there is far too simplistic an assumption that schools can somehow "teach enterprise culture"; this is a view that has yet to be 'tested' and in the course of time it may prove to be an impossible waste of time;

> (iv) given what we already know about the narrow range of enterprise ideology -- and in particular its concern with promoting principles of greed as being virtues -- there are substantial questions as to whether these forms of individualism are the ones that schools should be promoting ahead of others;

> (v) while the proponents of this kind of viewpoint are shrewd enough to camouflage their real agenda by framing it in terms of "fostering enterprising

skills among students", this is a fairly shallow deception under which to hide the real agenda of promoting the values of the wider business sector;

(vi) the major problem with the notion of enterprise is that it is invariably linked to and framed by considerations that are: (a) competitive rather than collaborative; (b) short-term and focus on immediacy, rather than long-term in nature; (c) rank and rate private rates of return ahead of collective or communal returns; (d) are based on an analogy of the survival of the fittest, rather than assisting others in difficulty; (e) are concerned with a calculative approach to measuring outcomes based on units of inputs; and, (g) have an almost fanatical pre-occupation with reducing every form of complexity to issues of the "bottom line";

(vii) what gets expunged in this worldview are matters that deal with: (a) compassion and caring for others; (b) the rendering of complexity and meaning making; (c) understanding the world (rather than merely extracting something from it); (d) challenging the status quo (rather than accepting it for personal and commercial short-term gain), and; (e) living in a world that is palpably unjust and searching for ways that are more socially just;

(viii) in other words, agenda of self-interest (even when collectively conceived) are pursued in ways that produce corrupt and unhealthy emphasis on the calculative rates of returns in human activity.

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