Do we want change or improvement in school education?

This is an adaptation of an address recently recorded for the 3rd International Seminar on Education convened by the Brazilian Social Service of Industry organisation (SESI) on the topic of "Youth and the New High School Model: responsibilities for an effective change"

When I was a university student in the 1980s, every year elections were held for the Student Representative Council. One year, one student group had as its election slogan "Vote for Change!". Another student group in the election had a different slogan: "Don't vote for change - vote for Improvement!" So, I put this question: if you had to choose, what would you vote for? "Change" or "Improvement"? Surely you would vote for improvement, because change might be change for the worse.

The point of the story is very simple and straightforward, namely that when it comes to asking how to introduce effective change, one first has to ask: "How do you know the change will be an improvement on what we currently have?" In order to answer this question, you have to some objective standard of measurement that allows you say, on the basis of evidence, that a new model of schooling is better than the current model of schooling, since just because something is new does not mean it is better.

So how does one measure the quality of schooling?

The problem that many advocates for a new model of schooling have is that a central tenet of their reform agenda is that the current standards which are used to measure the quality of schooling themselves have to be rejected. They reject the usual standards by which the quality of schooling is measured in the existing paradigm.

For example, they will say it doesn't matter if school examination or standardised test results are not as good at these new schools because such exams and tests are an inadequate measure of the quality of schooling. They reject exam results as a valid measure. But they usually do not have any alternative metric by which to judge, no alternative set of objective criteria for measurement. All they are left with is often subjective assertions that attempt to persuade people by the emotional force with which their arguments are put, accusing the current system of being "an outdated, industrial model" or "not meeting the needs of students in the 21st century" without offering any alternative objective standard by which the new school model can be assessed as better than the current model.

In Australia at the moment this debate is very much alive, and interestingly the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic is very relevant. In Australia, the university sector is heavily reliant on attracting international students, who pay high fees to attend Australian universities. But COVID-19 has reduced the high numbers of international students substantially. International student numbers have slumped during coronavirus, with student visa applications falling 36 per cent to about 262,000 in the year to June 2021.

This has led to intense competition among universities to attract domestic students, because each undergraduate student that is enrolled attracts public subsidies from the government. Under pressure to attract students, a number of universities, including some of the most prestigious in the country, are lowering their entry standards by making early and unconditional offers of a place in their courses to school students in their final year of school.

This appears to be having a negative impact on student achievement in senior secondary exams, especially among those students from middle and lower-socio economic groups who have discovered that they don't necessarily need to work extremely hard to get the highest mark they can in order to get into the university course of their choice. Their level of engagement is dropping because the incentive to perform at their best is being weakened as the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) becomes less relevant.

This is undermining the status and importance of the senior secondary school exams. But for the advocates of new models of schooling, this development is a good thing, because they argue that the regime of rigorous, externally assessed standardised examinations is not the best way to assess a student's knowledge and capabilities or the quality of an educational institution. They make a similar argument to support their opposition to NAPLAN.

I have a great deal of respect for many of these passionate educators, and while they are right to point to the fact that the nature of education cannot be adequately captured by such exams and tests, this is not of itself an argument for abandoning those tests or for overturning the whole system. Rather it is an argument for coming up with more robust complementary measures of student achievement and schooling quality in the areas that the new model advocates assert are more important, such as student wellbeing and engagement and skills such as critical and creative thinking, generic problem-solving and collaboration and communication.

So, attention is now turning to how such capabilities can be assessed objectively and reported in a valid and reliable way. In Australia we are developing various models to assess and report upon these kinds of attributes, not as a replacement for senior secondary exams, but as a complement to them. The motivation for this is generally well-meaning, namely, to provide students from lower socio-economic communities a credential that says what they can do, to complement the traditional academic credentials in which they tend not to do so well due to the deficit of educational capital that often exists in their households.

However, there is a major risk entailed in this focus on skills and capabilities if it comes at the expense of providing such students with access to powerful knowledge, often esoteric, decontextualised disciplinary knowledge that may be at first unfamiliar and difficult to master. This is the kind of knowledge that the most powerful people in society have, which delivers them access to opportunities that many others don't have.

This is why two of the catchcries used by advocates for new models of school use – engagement and relevance – need to be carefully considered. On the surface, who could possibly object to students being engaged and finding their learning relevant to the real world? Surely this is a good thing? But the way this advocacy translates into practice can be potentially very limiting for disadvantaged students and end up solidifying rather than weakening socio-economic hierarchies.

Consider, for example, the following quotes from a 2018 Report from a UK-based organisation called The Innovation Unit (who claim that their mission is "creating impact, reducing inequalities, transforming systems") entitled "New School Models in the US: ten things we have learned". I will briefly refer to three of these lessons before making my concluding comments.

The first lesson was, apparently, that **Engagement precedes content learning – it doesn't happen the other way around.** *"Who, in truth, would imagine it being other than this?" asks the author, who goes on: 'The deferred gratification model of engagement – "You will need good results to get a good job in the real world" – doesn't work for most learners from socio-economically challenging backgrounds…'*

Another lesson was **Our conventional paradigm of school constrains engagement**

'Ask young people to name one word that characterises their experience of school and most will say ''boring''. This is not true of the students in the schools we have visited and studied, because their entire study programme derives from or sparks their passions and interest, and they can see its relevance in the real-world.'

And one more lesson was **Schools don't have to be organised around subjects, lessons and timetables**

'The historical classification of knowledge into "subjects" is an anachronism', writes the author. "The ubiquitous 'one hour lesson' is a design to fit in all of the 10 or more subjects and teachers that a young

person will see each week… At many of the schools we have worked with, students can have whole day learning sessions supported by their advisory teacher and shaped by the focus of the project they are engaged with or by their personal learning plan."

The assumption that lack of engagement is a consequence of students being taught knowledge that is organised into disciplines which are not directly relevant to a student's everyday experience has the potential to do a great deal of damage to the life opportunities of disadvantaged students. It risks imposing the "soft bigotry of low expectations" on those students if, in the name of engagement, we adults provide insufficient direction to them about the kinds of things they need to learn as opposed to what they may want to learn or fail to expose them to knowledge that takes them beyond their current, limited real-world contexts.

This is why, if education is to have broader purposes, students – and especially those from disadvantaged communities - have to be given access to the theoretical, decontextualised knowledge that will allow them to become people who drive social change as opposed to being driven by forces manipulated by others. We need to offer them access to a world beyond their own horizon and beyond their immediate context.

This kind of knowledge is powerful, because of its capacity to challenge the social distribution of power such that anyone, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can engage meaningfully with - and influence - the public conversations that shape our community. It empowers them with the capacity to think critically and creatively about their context, rather than to merely "get on in the world" that is bound by that context.

The soft bigotry of low expectations is on show whenever it is argued that students from disadvantaged communities are not sufficiently academically able to take on a curriculum that expands their horizons in this way, so we need to box them into their own context and make learning "relevant" to them by only exposing them to things they are already familiar with, or only things that they are interested in learning about, all for the sake of "engagement".

Finally, I would suggest that it is the quality of the teaching that has the biggest impact on engagement and learning. A good teacher can make a so-called "boring" subject exciting, and a poor teacher can make even the most exciting topic lifeless for students. We have so many brilliant teachers in Australia. If we are serious about improving outcomes for our most disadvantaged students, not only do we need to focus on initial teacher education, but we also need to find ways - through quality, sustainable models of professional development - to spread the expertise of our best teachers, so as to build collective teacher efficacy at scale. That is what will really make for effective improvement.