

*Welcoming Address
by*

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At the

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Gifted and Talented Children Inc*

at

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on

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The title of this year's Conference is "Productive Partnerships for a Smart Education".

Conference organizers frequently agonise over such titles hoping they encapsulate both the aspirations of their delegates and the key messages they wish to hear and translate into their personal roles, knowledge and skills.

This translation usually occurs internally, sometimes externally (when applying for funds to come to a conference) and sometimes collectively (when having a coffee break and discussing the "relevance" of the previous presenter).

Tonight I am going to discuss how I, as Patron of the Queensland Gifted and Talented Association and Commissioner for Children and Young People, have interpreted the title in the hope that my musings may prompt you to seek maximum personal, school, family and community outcomes from your attendance over the next few days. The opening phrase in the Conference title is "productive partnerships".

This is a buzz word that encompasses a range of activities across a range of settings.

To my mind, and in tonight's context, it raises the issue that *"children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what childhood should be."*¹

For some of us, a child is an innocent who lives in the golden age of life. Wordsworth describes this image of the child as trailing clouds of glory from God who is its home. Adults who hold this view argue that this child must be protected from a society that seeks to corrupt such innocence.

A second adult view of the child focuses on children as blank pages – or empty vessels. I suspect Ignatius Loyola subscribed to this view when he argued for Jesuit influence over the crucial first seven years of a child's life.

A third view sees the child in terms of an innate process of ages and stages in a ladder like progression to adulthood. This view, espoused by such people as Piaget, makes little reference to the impact of culture, history or environment.

A fourth version, and the one on which I have based my comments tonight, envisages the child as an active participant in the construction of its identity, knowledge and culture.

[This] image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain.

*Instead [this] image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children."*ⁱⁱ

Childhood in this version is a social construction both for and by children within a negotiated set of social relationships. It implies that we should listen to children and acknowledge their contributions to our wellbeing.

In Africa the old saying goes...

It takes a village to raise a child

The balance of this adage notes...

*The world is a village now
It isn't very large
It's a struggle just for survival
Families working so hard*

It takes a whole village to raise a childⁱⁱⁱ

The health and well being of our children and young people is inextricably linked to the systems and values of local communities – the village if you will - and for this reason, responsibility for nurturing must be shared.

Because of our current rate of change and development, social researcher Hugh Mackay (1993) has dubbed our age the Age of Redefinition.

He says:

'When I look forward to the next 25 years, I suspect that the core issue will be the preservation of our sense of being a community.

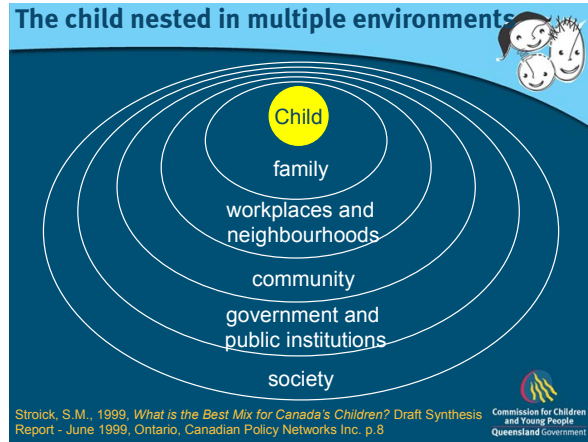
The past 25 years have often been about fragmentation, disconnection and alienation. Many of us are wisely deciding that it's time for a renewed emphasis on reconnection.'^{iv}

The 1996 Survey of the Social Outcomes of Schooling demonstrated that Australian students regarded helping and supporting others, acquiring new knowledge and skills, equality, respect for others, child protection, respecting society's laws and rules and honesty as very important socio-cultural characteristics.

Conversely, they felt pessimistic about their capacity to effect change and improvement, protect the environment or influence government^v. The challenge then becomes how we empower children and young people, and especially those who are gifted and talented, to realise their aspirations and contribute to the resolution of issues that confound us all.

Certainly schools do seek to address the academic, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual development of students.

They are, however, but one of the multiple environments which shape our children and young people.



This model of 'The Child Nested in Multiple Environments' provides a graphic representation of this concept and highlights the way in which strategic and staged inter-generational, cross cultural and interdisciplinary partnerships might serve to optimise outcomes for children, young people, their families and the wider community^{vi}.

So productive partnerships implies to me that we all work towards, and live in, a child friendly community.

I define a child friendly community as

one which values and respects children and caters for the diversity of their cultural backgrounds and circumstances.

It recognises the impact of political, social and economic decisions on children and their caregivers.

It acknowledges the rights, needs and interests of children and builds these into its decision making processes.^{vii}

This definition suggests productive partnerships which coordinate resource utilisation and services provided by relevant government departments, non-government organisations, local government, service clubs and business groups in order to optimise outcomes for children and young people.

It is based on several principles, including:

- creation of safe, 'child friendly' environments;
- a sense of societal responsibility for children;
- strengthened relationships between families and communities; and,
- facilitating a voice for children and supporting their participation in the community.

So gifted and talented children need to be viewed and supported holistically. They inhabit, and have to manage in, multiple environments, such as family, school and community.

There has been a growing interest in another relevant paradigm for productive partnerships. The holistic framework of developmental asset building acknowledges and promotes "people skills, people resources, trusting relationships, and the strength of collaborative networks and partnerships, both formal and informal, existing within the community"^{viii}.

It celebrates connectedness and is built on the intersection of two rationales - the promotion of a community's well-being and accumulation of developmental skills. This is an 'agent of change' narrative.

The asset-promotion approach requires a community to take responsibility for determining how many assets it possesses as an indicator of where strengths lie. The community then proceeds to accumulate the assets, 'or building blocks' it does not yet hold and to close fissures.

This has a cyclic effect as an asset-accumulating community nurtures and strengthens young people who then provide the critical mass to further enhance the community's well-being.

The concept "presupposes a family's capacity for optimism and hope, a sense of connectedness, and the availability of accessible community resources"^{ix}.

It requires young people to be 'gifted' with positive experiences from elders, and communities to be responsible for encouraging all young people to experience and gather more 'building blocks'. It produces intergenerational bridges^x.

Wong's^{xi} research substantiates that:

Young people who have strong bonds to their families, schools, and communities are more invested in following the beliefs and standards held by these groups. These bonds are created by providing opportunities for young people to be involved in meaningful ways, skills for successful involvement, and recognition for their involvement.

[The Search Institute's Developmental Assets covers "the basic inputs or raw resources that young people need to build competence, confidence, connections, and character"^{xii}.

It consists of forty asset 'building blocks' that are the indicators of thriving.

It includes both external and internal 'assets' which are grouped into eight categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity.

[Scales^{xiii} states for example that "young people with 31-40 of the assets are 17 times more likely than asset-poor youth with 0-10 of the assets to avoid problem alcohol use, whereas - those with 31-40 assets are 8 times more likely to succeed at school than youth with 0-10 assets."

So the more 'building blocks' we have the better we are at succeeding in this new and ever changing world we live in. You will note as well that this is not just an individualistic approach, but is a broader, ecologically embedded approach.

Asset-building is also interesting because it embraces participation by young people and requires meaningful involvement and membership by all sectors of the community.

It is particularly important that young people participate fully and not tokenistically to achieve asset growth. Instead youth become allies working with adults and adults work with youth in "nonadultist ways"^{xiv}.

Additionally, this community empowerment creates supportive environments for young people to enhance their social, physical, psychological and educational well being.

Most importantly, asset-building is self-sustaining in the long term.

Dr Bob Hardingham has been undertaking a limited measurement of developmental assets in a small number of primary and secondary schools in Queensland.

In general he believes that these students should have more developmental assets than their American counterparts. However, he has noted some concerning findings.

His limited work reveals some significant areas of weakness in Australian communities.

For example, Australian youth do not feel valued by their communities. They are not called upon as a resource to address community issues and there are few opportunities for them to serve the community.

Neighbourhood boundaries are very weak (as opposed to school boundaries) and peer influences are often perceived as negative.

Young people claim there are limited creative activities available to them, far too few youth programs and they do not feel supported by their neighbourhoods. They are alienated by homework and many feel there is little bonding between them and their schools. Many say they lack skills for planning and decision-making in their lives and often resort to the resolution of issues through conflict. Only a small number of young people read regularly for pleasure.

On the other hand there are some very positive dimensions.

Many young people feel they have strong support from their families, despite the fact that a much smaller number feel they can discuss issues of personal concern openly with their parents.

Most feel both school and family boundaries are strong and they have access to good adult role models. They want to achieve well and feel reasonably good about themselves.

Many feel they have adequate interpersonal and cultural skills, are responsible and try hard at school.

He considers only 20% of the young people in his study to have an adequate number of developmental assets. There is certainly room for much improvement.

There are of course, a myriad of strategies to encompass gifted and talented children within both child friendly communities and an asset based approach to productive partnerships. =

There is an excellent example embedded in the conference program with three sessions being conducted by children and young people.

Let me mention two recent initiatives which focus on the common element in both these approaches – participation or what the headlines in this week’s Education Views call “Creating tomorrow’s leaders today”.

(It also should be noted that Leadership for Students is one of the on-line learning modules developed by current coordinators of Learning Development Centres for Gifted and Talented.)

The Future Leaders Program sponsored by RACQ (there is a productive partnership!) seeks to engage Year 10-12 students in identifying a local issue and joining with business and community leaders to find a workable solution. Schools have until 30 May to nominate for the program.

The second, is the Prudential Youth Leadership Institute which consists of approximately 30 hours of facilitated experimental workshops as well as hands on field exercises and a community capacity building project. This year they are conducting Institutes in Brisbane, Cairns, Bundaberg, Townsville, Gold Coast and other locations on request.

These are both possible valuable additions for your gifted and talented activities.

The second phrase in the theme of this conference is “smart education”. Ideally of course we would hope that all education is smart and that something as intrinsically worthy as education does not require a qualifying adjective!

Nevertheless the term “smart” has a political currency in our State that should benefit our gifted and talented students.

As I commented at this conference last year,

“We now seem to be striving to pursue, if not attain excellence in a global context. We need look no further than the vision for Queensland state education which talks about the “knowledge economy of the future”.

Business analysts and motivators implore people to ‘work smart, not harder’. The Queensland Premier seeks to build a ‘smart state’. Educators strive to devise rich learning tasks and differentiated schooling models.

Initiatives such as Education Queensland’s Showcase Awards for Excellence also point to a groundswell of recognition and strategic response to the needs of our gifted and talented students.

Interestingly, however, what all these slogans and programs lack is any specific reference to gifted and talented children and young people and how their potential can be better identified and nurtured for their individual benefit and the economic and social enrichment of the communities in which they live.

Sadly, while we are increasingly adopting the mantra that excellence is good, our community does little to ensure that our brightest lights are allowed to shine.”

As Commissioner for Children and Young People, I advocate that a smart education is one that is inclusive and incorporates provisions for all, including our gifted and talented students, to reach their potential.

Last year, I urged this association to consider different modes of advocacy for its members and children. This year I want to acknowledge the power of language in undertaking that advocacy role.

I was reminded of this power in reading the latest “Perspectives on Educational Leadership” entitled “Naming, Framing and Inclusive Practices”. The article is written by a primary teacher who is advocating for inclusive schooling for students with disabilities.

However her arguments and logic could be applied to all students, including those currently termed gifted and talented. She captures parental concerns in her questions.

- Does classifying a child for extra government support automatically give them a better education?

And if so,

- Shouldn't all children receive an educational needs diagnosis?
- Where does the line fall?
- What constitutes 'normality'?^{xv}

She cites advocacy by the Deputy Director-General of Education Queensland for inclusive education for children with disabilities in her claim that: “Exclusive practices are perpetuated when the values, policies and priorities of schools are not questioned with regard to what is equitable”^{xvi}

Could not this comment also apply in the context of what is a smart education for those identified as gifted and talented?

Finally I want to draw to your attention the characteristics of an inclusive school as delineated by significant writers with expertise in special education in the belief that they will also resonate for those with an interest in a smart education for gifted and talented students.

- School-wide approaches whereby the practice is accepted in all classes and personnel within the school;
- The belief that all children can learn and will benefit from learning with their peers;
- A sense of community and a positive attitude towards diversity;
- Services based on individual needs that have been recognised rather than the adhering to labels;

- Proportions of students with and without disabilities;
- Supports provided in general education, not in separate programmes or locations as schools recognise that all students have special needs;
- Teacher collaboration and professional development programs;
- Curriculum adaptation that enables all students to benefit;
- Enhanced and wide-ranging, instructional strategies that consider student differences in intelligence, learning styles, strengths and limitations;
- Standards and outcomes that count for everybody with necessary adaptations made in the measurement instruments and procedures for students with disabilities.^{xvii}

I would obviously need to amend the fifth and final characteristics but I would argue that these stand as a robust platform from which you also can advocate. Inclusive schooling of this order is my preferred model for a smart education for gifted and talented children and young people.

I believe that children and young people, as human beings living their daily lives, “deserve to be highly valued for the unique contribution they make through just being those children^{xviii}” and young people.

Ensuring that gifted and talented children have the opportunity to reach their full potential as human beings is the core business of the QAGTC and the fundamental reason we are here at this Conference.

Let us move forward in a positive, proactive, asset-building, strengths-based fashion into our new and exciting future.

^{i i} Mayall, 1996: 1, Cited in Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A., 1999, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*, London, Falmer Press.

ⁱⁱ Malaguzzi, L., 1993a: 10, Cited in Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A., 1999, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*, London, Falmer Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.gnv.fdt.net/~sbylthe/peacednow/WHOLEVILL/song.html>

^{iv} Mackay, H., ‘Vision 21’ in *The Age*, <http://www.theage.com.au/daily/990312/mackay.html>, extracted 16 April 1999, p. 2.

^v Social Objectives of Schooling – Steering Committee Meeting Minutes 3/97

^{vi} Stroick, S.M., What is the Best Mix for Canada’s Children? Draft Synthesis Report – June 1999, Ontario, Canadian Policy Networks Inc., 1999, p.8

^{vii} NSW Child Protection Council, *A Framework for Building a Child-Friendly Society*, Sydney, 1997, p. 3.

^{viii} Mudaly, B. (1999). Building capacity in culturally diverse communities to enhance resilience in young people and their families, *Youth Studies Australia*, 18(4), p. 42.

^{ix} Mudaly, B. (1999). Building capacity in culturally diverse communities to enhance resilience in young people and their families, *Youth Studies Australia*, 18(4), p. 43.

^x Checkoway, B. and Richards-Schuster, K. (2001). *Young People as Agents of Community Change: New Lessons from the Field*. Retrieved September 13, 2001, from <http://www.wested.org/ppfy/j001yp.htm>

^{xi} Wong, S.C. (1998). *Communities That Care: An Operating System for Positive Youth Development*. Retrieved September 13, 2001 from <http://www.wested.org/ppfy/caret.htm>

^{xii} Pittman, K. (1998). *Beyond Prevention: Linking Teenage Pregnancy Prevention to Youth Development*. Retrieved September 13, 2001 from <http://www.wested.org/ppfy/beyond.htm>

^{xiii} Scales, P.C. (1998). *Asset-Building and Risk Reduction: Complementary Strategies for Youth Development*. Retrieved September 13, 2001 from <http://www.wested.org/ppfy/asset.htm>

^{xiv} Checkoway, B. and Richards-Schuster, K. (2001). *Young People as Agents of Community Change: New Lessons from the Field*. Retrieved September 13, 2001 from <http://www.wested.org/ppfy/j001yp.htm>

^{xv} Slee, C (2003) *Naming, Framing and Inclusive Practices*, Perspectives on Educational Leadership, Vol 13, Number 3, 2003.

^{xvi} Slee, C (2003) *Naming, Framing and Inclusive Practices*, Perspectives on Educational Leadership, Vol 13, Number 3, 2003.

^{xvii} Kerzner Lipsky, D. and Gartner, A. (1999). 'Inclusive education: a requirement of a democratic society'. In H. Daniels, and P. Garner, P. (eds) *Insider Perspectives on Inclusion – Raising voices, raising issues*. Sheffield: Philip Armstrong.

^{xviii} The National Children's Strategy (2000). *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives Executive Summary*, Dublin: The Stationery Office, Government Publications, p. 4.