## Open doors or prison walls?

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## Ross Homel Policy

I'm one of the lucky ones. Part of the baby-boom generation, I benefited from postwar economic prosperity and government policies that fostered opportunities for children of working-class families to get a good education and move ahead. As a generation, we contributed to the "reshaping of Australia", to borrow the subtitle of Don Aitkin's book *What Was It All For?* (Allen & Unwin, 2005), a reshaping that, according to his analysis, has rested on the three pillars of wealth, education and immigration.

Aitkin identifies education as the most important engine of change, the catalyst that enabled a threefold increase in wealth and a degree of cultural diversity that has transformed Australia into a more self-aware, creative and tolerant society. For Aitkin and most of his fellow graduates of the class of '53 at Armidale High School, Australia is a much better place than it used to be and education has been the key.

Education has certainly served me well, although I graduated more than a decade after Aitkin. I was the first on either side of my family to go to university and, with two degrees by the age of 22, I was able to walk into virtually any job I wanted.

But there is another side to the Australian story. The story told by Fiona Stanley, Sue Richardson and Margot Prior in their provocatively titled *Children of the Lucky* Country? How Australian society has turned its back on children and why children matter (Pan Macmillan, 2005). They show that despite unprecedented levels of economic prosperity in the postwar years – the same period surveyed by Aitkin – many outcomes for children have actually deteriorated. Youth suicide rates were much higher at the end of the 20th century than they were in the immediate postwar years, as were many mental health problems. Physical health indicators of conditions such as obesity and type 2 diabetes also point to a worsening situation. <sup>1</sup>As they write: "The present generation of children may be the first in the history of the world to have lower life expectancy than their parents." Rates of juvenile crime, conduct disorder and other serious behavioural disturbances have also climbed steadily, so that behaviour problems have now become the most important cause of disability in childhood. iii The documentation of "modernity's paradox" is made the more depressing by data and arguments that show that all these problems are socially graded, the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged having increased over time. Indeed, growing social inequalities could be one of the main causes of the deteriorating outcomes.

The arguments and statistics presented by Stanley, Prior, and Richardson were made concrete for me – a criminologist with a passionate interest in crime prevention – by a series of news stories in *The Courier-Mail* late last year about plans for a new Queensland "super prison": iv a huge 4,000-bed jail, located somewhere in the state's south-east, to cater for an expected 90 per cent increase in prisoners over the next decade. The increase is officially driven by population growth, longer and more numerous prison sentences and a decline in the use of community service orders. The new corrections facility will, however, be humane – plans include a hospice for the increasing number of ageing prisoners.

Queensland judges have heeded the Government's injunction to "get tough on crime". It is tragic that in the "Smart State", where there is so much investment in research and development and where so much innovative work has been done to engage communities in social and physical renewal, that a powerful elite has exerted so much influence on one side of the criminal-justice equation without calling attention to the need to address the other side of the equation: getting tough on the causes of crime. It is tragic because the advocates of investment in prevention are less influential and prisons, in design and practice, punish and exclude from mainstream society some of the most vulnerable and damaged groups.

One driver of prison numbers, not mentioned in the official communiqués, is that indigenous communities have a higher than average birthrate. Put simply, young indigenous people will comprise an increasing proportion of the youth population over the next decade and young indigenous people are much more likely to come to the attention of the police and to end up in detention or jail than non-indigenous youth. Increasingly, prisons in Queensland (and elsewhere in Australia) may become long-term secure storage facilities for the troublesome black population.

Imprisonment for many indigenous people continues a history of punishment and exclusion that begins before birth and becomes an increasingly public problem as behaviour at school becomes unmanageable and the offending students are suspended, sent to special schools or expelled altogether. A few indigenous children in Queensland each year even achieve the extraordinary distinction of failing the remedial-behaviour management programs and are being excluded from preschool.

It is no coincidence that most people in jail have had disastrous experiences in the school system. It is very difficult in Australia to find system-wide statistics on prisoner educational levels and related factors, but the information we have through special surveys confirms that many individuals' pathways into prison are through the wreckage of their school careers. Prisoners are less likely to have completed high school than the general population, and they have poor cognitive functioning, limited literacy skills and poor numeracy. United States statistics show that 70 per cent of prisoners score in the two lowest literacy levels of the National Adult Literacy Survey, which means that they cannot write a letter explaining an error on a credit-card bill or understand a map or a bus timetable. According to a recent Australian study by Pamela Snow and Martine Powell, juvenile offenders not only have poor reading and writing skills, they have poor oral-language processing and production skills. This is significant since oral language abilities underpin the development of the social skills that can protect against behavioural problems.

In short, the developmental pathways of many of the young people at risk of becoming entangled in the criminal justice system are characterised by conflict and failure at school. Not surprisingly, these young people feel less attached to school than other students and are less well-connected and involved, thereby reproducing the attitudes and practices of many of their parents. Schools in areas with many of these students often make great efforts through special programs to reach them and to deal with the underlying problems, but these efforts frequently end in failure. There are many reasons for failure, among them the intergenerational nature of the problem (especially for indigenous children) and the need to take action well before children get to school. Underpinning everything are chaotic home environments and parents who are often so stressed by their economic and life circumstances that supporting their kids' schooling is completely beyond them.

What is to be done? It is not as if we have not been aware of these problems for a long time, but responses have varied dramatically over the years. Some states have legislated to hold parents responsible for their children's offences, a typically punitive, populist and intellectually vacuous policy that simply adds to the burdens of already over-burdened parents or carers. Another popular approach has been to concentrate on national economic development in the belief that a rising tide lifts all ships. However, the social and health trends documented by Stanley and her colleagues and by their counterparts in other developed countries provide convincing evidence that while economic growth might be necessary to improve the wellbeing of children, it is far from sufficient. What is needed are responses that actually address the roots of the problems, and do so in a way that is thoroughly grounded in research, is well-resourced and is designed for sustainability.

It is at this point that I am quite optimistic. Australia has a proud tradition of innovative community- and school-based programs through which a great deal has been learned and much has been achieved. I am proud to have made a modest contribution myself to this tradition through a community-based prevention initiative called Pathways to Prevention, developed in partnership with colleagues at Griffith University as well as the national welfare agency, Mission Australia, and local schools and communities. Vii Before describing this program and its rationale, it may be helpful to listen to a real story that illustrates the complexity of the issues – that shows how everything is ultimately connected to everything else – but also illustrates (in a small way) why I am cautiously optimistic that deteriorating child outcomes and super prisons are not inevitable. Viii

Bao's family came to the attention of the Vietnamese family-support worker, Mrs C, as a result of a friend bringing his younger brother, Minh, to the Vietnamese playgroup. Minh was an infant and Mrs C was told that his mother had died giving birth to him. The friend also told Mrs C that Bao's father had been "struggling" to manage the family and household responsibilities since the death of his wife and the arrival of the baby.

Mrs C contacted Bao's father, Duong, to tell him about the program and offer support. She arranged to visit Duong and his children at home. During this visit Mrs C noted that the family was not coping with the death. Despite having to leave his job to care for his family, Duong was not used to being responsible for household tasks. The family did not own a washing machine and Duong had not done any washing since the death of his wife. He never cooked and the two older children, Bao, 6, and Lan, 7, were living on two-minute noodles. Duong admitted he knew very little about caring for a baby. Mrs C observed that the older children were very "withdrawn" during her visit.

Mrs C referred the family to one of the Family Independence Program (FIP) counsellors, Mary, who visited them. Practical assistance was arranged, including a washing machine, and counselling commenced. The children spent the afternoon showing Mary around the school and talking about school. The following week at the Pathways centre, Mary engaged the children in activities such as colouring in pictures and making lanterns. However, when Mary suggested that they paint a picture of a family neither child complied. Indeed, Lan "withdrew quickly and said she did not want to" and Bao "completely ignored the request". Over the next few weeks, Mary engaged the children in a number of activities aimed at accessing and discussing their feelings about their mother. These were interspersed with fun activities such as making popcorn and visiting the park.

Later Mary and Mrs C met briefly with Duong to discuss his concerns about his wife's death. He did not speak much English and believed that the hospital had not fully explained the situation to him. Mary reviewed the possibility of seeking some advocacy support to help him obtain more information. Three months later, Duong visited the Vietnamese family-support worker to ask for her help in translating a letter that he had received from Legal Aid. He also described how he had visited his wife's grave on the 100th day anniversary of her death. They discussed his feelings about this. Duong agreed to attend a playgroup session focused on nutrition. He reported that, despite all the women there, he enjoyed the session and took home a "useful tip sheet". Duong also informed Mrs C that he wanted to go back to work, so Mrs C assisted him to access day care for Minh.

About this time, Lan disclosed that her father frequently expressed his anger violently by throwing chairs and becoming physically threatening. A week later, Duong brought Minh to the Vietnamese playgroup. While there, he talked to Mrs C about problems he was having managing the children. He admitted he often lost "his cool when the children misbehave". Mrs C discussed positive parenting practices with him and identified ways for Duong to use these practices at home. A few days later, Duong returned with a copy of the post-mortem report of his wife's death, which Mrs C translated and explained to him.

Mrs C then received a letter from the school detailing specific concerns that Bao's teacher had about his behaviour. She tried to contact Duong, but was unable to reach him. A case conference was held between staff from Bao's school and FIP workers. Together they were able to relate much of Bao's behavioural changes to the grief that he felt about his mother's death. The grief appeared to have intensified. The FIP staff also identified specific strengths that both Bao and Lan had demonstrated during the time that they had worked with them and the school agreed to develop specific activities for each child that used these strengths.

Six months after their first case conference and after much work with Duong and the children, the FIP staff met with the teachers and principal again. The teachers reported a great improvement in both children's behaviour and concentration, especially since Duong had remarried. Mary agreed to continue to see Bao and Lan until the end of term, and then to involve them in holiday activities. Beyond that, she said that she would make contact with them occasionally, to assist with their transition to their new grades at school.

What do we observe in this story? A life event – the death of the mother of three young children – triggered a crisis in a family with limited resources. As with many Vietnamese families, a lack of English and unfamiliarity with local institutions compounded the stress of what would be a tough time for anyone. The whole family needed to work through the grief and the resulting stresses and behavioural problems that manifested both at home and at school. Without the assistance and support provided through the program and school, violence and abuse at home and serious problems at school might have been the outcome.

It is important not to claim too much for the intervention. Duong had a job and could get another one after he started to get back on his feet. He remarried quickly, a sensible move in his circumstances. He had skills and resilience, and got by with a little help from his new friends. Nevertheless, the evidence from this story and from many others, and from our quantitative analyses of how child measures such as difficult behaviour improved more for those who participated in the program or whose parents participated, suggests that the program made a real difference.

Part of the significance of this is that the programs initiated through Pathways, both in the schools and in the community, are not radically different from programs and services in hundreds of other disadvantaged communities throughout Australia. Unfortunately, many of these programs are not well evaluated and they nearly all struggle to maintain funding from year to year. After working with colleagues some years ago on a federal government report, *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*, I came to the conclusion that short-term funding of "pilot programs" is an Australian disease. Funding agencies seem to take the view that once a program is showing promising results it should be defunded so that another worthy group can have a go. The opposite should happen: promising programs should be more intensively resourced so that rigorous evidence of effectiveness can be gathered and the good results analysed. If this were done the knowledge about how to address complex social, health and behavioural problems could be developed more rapidly.

Despite having many elements in common with other programs, Pathways has unique features evident in the story of Duong's family. Community workers from specific ethnic groups are employed and are supported by professional staff (not the other way around). The program is extremely flexible and combines one-on-one support with group activities with a preventive emphasis like facilitated playgroups and parent training. It works simultaneously with children, parents, schools and ethnic communities, based on the international evidence that the best outcomes are achieved when direct developmental services to children are combined with family support and change in other key developmental settings. Of critical importance, the team is able to "hang in there" with families for months (in some cases, years), which is often the time it takes to observe progress. And they can adjust their input depending on changing needs and evidence of what is working (or not) in individual cases.

Over the four years during which the program has been operating, schools have emerged as central to the change processes at the heart of this model. Not only are schools and their associated preschools excellent sites for the delivery of child interventions, they are the most important developmental setting outside the family. How schools relate to children and their families and how they draw (or fail to draw) on the resources of helping agencies when children are in trouble, can make a critical difference to what happens to children. This is evident from the experience of Duong's family, where the family-support workers were able to mediate in the relationship between the family and the school and address the causes of the challenging behaviours exhibited by the children.

Yet the research evidence, and our direct experience, is that there is usually a yawning gulf between families and schools in disadvantaged areas, and that schools have great difficulty in moving outside their own systems, routines and resources in addressing behaviour problems. Despite the best intentions of principals and their teachers, children are still routinely suspended or excluded – with devastating consequences for the children and at great cost to the nation – because they do not have easy access to multidisciplinary early intervention services that could make a real difference. All schools serving disadvantaged communities struggle to engage effectively with parents. Pathways focuses on how to build connections between families, schools and helping agencies.

These problems are not new, and nor are programs designed to address them. It is now more than 30 years since the first Karmel report was published.<sup>x</sup> It provided the impetus for the Disadvantaged School Program (DSP) and other federal government

initiatives designed to address (at least in a limited way) the effects of inequality. In his 1990 review of the DSP, David McRae noted that probably 150,000 projects had been funded over the life of the program and that reviews had consistently commented on its quality and effectiveness. xi

Yet political fashions have changed. Now the emphasis is less on centrally funded responses to "need" and more on value for money, local solutions, improved educational outcomes and standardised testing. Perhaps we are also experiencing a return to a level of pessimism about our national capacity to address disadvantage through government programs, a pessimism that Richard Teese notes in *Getting Smart* was a feature of the original Karmel report in 1973.

"Nothing works" epidemics seem to grip the social sciences from time to time. In criminology the disease took hold about the same time that the Karmel report was published, based on a famous review of the effectiveness of offender rehabilitation and education programs. Even then a cautious review of the evidence would have led the objective reader to conclude that actually "everything works about as well as everything else, and programs gains are quite modest".

In the intervening decades there has been more and better research, not just on interventions for convicted offenders but on an extensive range of primary prevention programs in schools, families and communities. The result is that there is a much higher level of optimism now about our capacity to prevent the onset of crime and reduce recidivism than there was 30 years ago. Certainly, effects are still generally modest – of the order of 0.2 or 0.3 in effect size, to use technical jargon – but programs are usually quite cost-effective and result in significant changes in the pathways of many children and young people. It can be stated with confidence that the "Nothing Works Era" is over.

The most famous example of a prevention program that has shown long-term benefits for extremely disadvantaged children is the Perry Preschool Program. The goal of the project, which was implemented between 1962 and 1967 in a deprived area of Michigan, was to enhance intellectual development and subsequent school achievement in disadvantaged three- and four-year-old children. An enriched preschool program was provided daily in addition to weekly home visits by teachers. Although cognitive gains for children in the program were not maintained, the program participants' school achievement and behaviour were significantly better than those in the control group, who did not have access to the program. They were more likely to graduate from high school and continue to further education. By ages 27 and 40, they had higher incomes and were more likely to be home owners, and at age 40 more program-group males than controls were employed. The impact of the preschool program on later offending was impressive: at age 15, program children had lower self-reported offending; at age 19, they were less likely to have been arrested; at age 27, the control group had twice the number of arrests; and at age 40 the program group had many fewer lifetime arrests than the control group.xiii

It is not too much to claim that the Perry program and a small number of other "classic" studies have provided the inspiration for hundreds of prevention programs, from the huge Sure Start program in the United Kingdom to a myriad of small, localised interventions. We would count Pathways as one of the products of the culture of optimism created by this small group of experiments. An enormous amount has been learned from these initiatives over the years, including the central importance of education and the school system.

Our thinking has evolved beyond the standard risk and protective factors framework imported from public health so that we now tend to think more along

"welfare" lines. This means we emphasise understanding and overcoming the lack of fit between the resources possessed by individuals, families and communities and the resources they need to jump the barriers and participate in mainstream institutions such as schools. We certainly do not discard the scientific evidence about risk factors and what works; rather, we attempt to reinterpret and apply this highly quantitative body of knowledge in light of the needs of families like Duong's.

We are convinced that this enterprise is worthwhile. We are not naïve enough to imagine that one project in one area can change the world, nor are we naïve enough to think that assisting individuals or families is the same as bringing about system-wide change. But we do believe that systematic long-term research can contribute to fundamental shifts in social policy and the allocation of social resources. Something close to a national consensus has developed recently around the need to address the effects of inequality through interventions that focus on the early years (0-5), with all state governments and the Commonwealth now committing substantial resources. The most prominent example is the nationwide Communities for Children program. When this major new program was launched by the Prime Minister in April 2004 he acknowledged the formative role of the Brisbane Pathways Project in its design, and screened a video of our work. Yet ten years ago, the idea of early intervention was largely absent from Australian policy discourse. What brought about change were the long-term evaluations of overseas interventions, the publication locally of reports like Pathways to Prevention, the growth in the Australian evidence-base, and the formation of major lobbies such as the National Initiative for the Early Years and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. This consensus could not have emerged without the body of scientific evidence that has been built so painfully over the past 50 years.

What is now needed is an extension of the principles underpinning the early-years policies to school-age children and beyond, into early adulthood, and a concomitant refocusing on the school system. XiV As Aitkin emphasises at the end of his book, the reduction of systematic inequalities reproduced through the education system is a major challenge for the nation.

There are many grounds for optimism about what could be achieved; what is required now is the political will to achieve it. This country opened doors once before for a whole generation of young Australians. Surely after 50 years of sustained economic growth, we can afford to open them again for our most disadvantaged children and young people, for the enrichment of us all. This makes more sense to me than a future filled with super prisons.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> P. 52

iii Stewart-Brown, S. (1998). "Public health implications of childhood behaviour problems and parenting programmes" in A. Buchanan and B. L. Hudson (eds.), *Parenting, schooling and children's behaviour* (pp. 21-33). Sydney: Ashgate. iv *The Courier-Mail*, October 29, OCTOBER 28 ACCORDING TO FAIRFAX DATABASE 2005: "Super prison plan includes hospice care"; October 31, 2005: "Prison slammed as financial drain".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Fact Sheet: Corrections Education, January 2001. National Institute for Literacy, www.nifl.gov.

vi Snow, P. & Powell, M. (2002). The language processing and production skills of young offenders: Implications for enhancing prevention and intervention strategies.

Report to Criminology Research Council on Grant 23/00-01.

vii For further details of the Pathways Project go to <a href="www.gu.edu.au/centre/kceljag">www.gu.edu.au/centre/kceljag</a> and click on "Pathways".

- viii I am indebted to Angela Carr and to Phuong Le-Huy and Cherie Lamb from the Mission Australia Pathways team for this story. All names have been changed and much important detail omitted.
- ix This report is available from <a href="https://www.ag.gov.au/www/ncpHome.nsf/Web%2BPages/B78FEDFB9A1D980ACA256B">www.ag.gov.au/www/ncpHome.nsf/Web%2BPages/B78FEDFB9A1D980ACA256B</a> 14001A096E?OpenDocument
- <sup>x</sup> Karmel, P. (1973). Schools in Australia. Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- xi McRae, D. (1990). Getting it right: Schools serving disadvantaged communities. A report commissioned by the Schools Council, National Board of Education, Employment and Training. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

xii Lipton, D., Martinson, R. & Wilks, J. (1975). *The effectiveness of correctional treatment: A survey of treatment evaluation studies.* New York: Praeger.

- xiii Schweinhart, L.J. (2004). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 40: Summary, conclusions, and frequently asked questions.* Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
- xiv See Patton, G., Bowes, G., Sawyer, S., Homel, R. & Stanley, F. (2005). "Towards a national agenda for youth?" (Editorial). *Medical Journal of Australia*, 183(8): 394-395.