



A TARGETED APPROACH

By Wilson McCaskill

I believe wholeheartedly that schools are four walls around the future.

I also believe that schools must avoid seeing themselves as victims of their communities and instead see themselves as the hubs of their communities and the agents of change.

I know society at large sees schools as both of these because whenever something happens that puts society at risk, be it terrorism, radicalisation, pornography, obesity, drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, homophobia, gender inequality, and a host of other unsafe, damaging or abusive behaviour a host of voices, from every strata of society, declares that the issue needs to be addressed in schools.

And the only thing that can be heard above this loud and constant demand for schools to take action is the moan of the teachers whose legs are already bowed from the weight of all that must be achieved in a day that is too short, in a week that is too intense, in a year that is too exhausting.

We have fallen into the habit of thinking that every problem needs its own specific program or solution. We trust in the idea of a “targeted” approach and holistic, all-inclusive processes for developing decency, character, will power, consideration and kindness have fallen out of favour.

There is a seductive logic to the idea that targeting a problem directly is the quickest way to solve it. This logic is easy to exploit and we have fallen prey to the idea that tackling a specific problem with anything less than a specific solution is a poor use of time, resources and funds and is destined to fail.

One obvious problem of this targeted approach is that even if it works it only solves one problem at a time or at the very least only the number of problems that can be addressed in the time available. And in schools, that time, no matter how willing the teachers may be, cannot take preference over the time mandated to literacy and numeracy.

Not only that, for every problem solved comes a handful of new problems. I doubt if anyone will contradict me when I suggest that whatever successes our targeted approach has delivered, the number of social ills schools are being asked or are about to be asked to deal with have not diminished in number. Tie this in with an incessant demand for tirelessly improving academic outcomes in every school and it becomes easy to see why our teachers groan every time they stream the news on their digital device.



There is a lot of money to be made from a population that blindly believes in a targeted approach to all things consequential. This belief allows individuals, groups, agencies and organisations to subdivide and dissect our social ills into pieces small enough for all parties to select their target, devise the quick fix strategy and claim the financial prize. Schools, like politicians, know they need to be seen to be doing something, especially if they have a vocal and strident parent group or board. No better way to appease these agitated adults than to state, with conviction, that a particular program has been targeted to solve the problem. This program often comes with a suitably specific title. (Wait for “Reducing Radicalism – moving children safely from the classroom to the community” to arrive at your favourite app store.)

Of course, target specific strategies are often necessary and can be very effective. But many of our social ills, though identified by separate and specific behaviour, are rooted in common and destructive belief systems, attitudes and disadvantaged or diminished personal and social development. In that sense, addressing social ills is more akin to learning how to dance, where a sense of timing and rhythm is as much a necessity as correct footwork and arm placement, than following a recipe for blueberry muffins.

We have fallen in love with the promised benefits of targeting. We visit our doctors wanting a specific tablet for this and a proven therapy for that or our health food store for a herb that will do this and a mineral that will do that or a supplement that will combine with a leafy green to lift, boost and enhance.

Perhaps it’s because we have fallen prey to the pseudo science that surrounds numerous “feel good about yourself” industries that has us placing so much faith in targeted approaches to everything from building super bodies to developing safer schools and communities.

I feel for the teachers caught in the crossfire of targeted programs that are competing for time and space in a crowded school day. I feel for teachers buying into specific strategies without a cohesive and beneficial philosophy. I feel for all teachers responsible for delivering improvements in every aspect of a child’s life while using disparate and philosophically disconnected programs.

We have come to assume that a whole school approach means using targeted strategies across the whole school. I believe for any and all strategies to genuinely be a whole school approach they need to be delivered within the framework of a unifying philosophy. A philosophy that can be strengthened and supported by the use of all processes, procedures and programs within the school and which in turn supports those processes, procedures and programs.

It is simply not “whole school” if the use of a particular means for academic, artistic, physical, personal and social development does not add to the advancement and enrichment of every other means...and that is not possible without a unifying philosophy.



We are at a time of endless encroachment on the innocence of children for commercial, political or ideological gain. The social ills of our societies and the belief that the earlier we implement preventative measures the better, has made schools the target for every problem specific program that nervous and insecure people of influence believe will calm an equally nervous and insecure population.

This isn't going to stop anytime soon. In all likelihood it will only get worse. However, schools can stand strong and steady in the face of this great pressure if they see past the seduction of a targeted approach and trust that developing personal and social capabilities (as described in the *General Capabilities* of the National Curriculum) in all areas of learning, will result in children who are considerate of themselves each other and the world in which they live with sound and good reasons for the things they say and do.

I believe the use of Play Is The Way® is like the use of a broad-spectrum antibiotic. Used carefully and well it can alleviate or cure a wide range of ills or sufficiently weaken any marauding bacteria to give a targeted antibiotic a far greater chance of success. Alternatively, it can be seen as a means of immunising a population against many potentially harmful viruses. Of course, like any antibiotic its effectiveness will be diminished if used erratically and this may put patients at risk of falling ill to a once curable but now resistant virus.

Seen as a mass immunisation procedure administered by teachers "*in all learning areas and at every stage of a student's schooling*" (National Curriculum) means PITW becomes the underlying philosophy that informs and supports every aspect of teaching practice. It becomes the message as well as the messenger and the context in which all subjects are taught.

I'm convinced that enveloping children in the deeper meaning and implications of our key concepts, alongside a language that triggers self-reflection and physically interactive experiences that are metaphors, similes or analogies of life, is an effective strategy for helping children to independently determine what is right and best to do. If not, then PITW will at the very least make students more receptive and responsive to any targeted intervention deemed necessary.

Sometime ago I read an article about a sculptor named Roberts. His belief was, "In this world where technology is constantly advancing human nature is not; it is often the values of the past that are most relevant today."

This resonated strongly in me and it has flicked back into my consciousness now. His remark made me aware of how words like character, willpower and decency have become old fashioned. Today we talk about personality, motivation and values. I can't help feeling that yesterday's words have more weight and worth. Perhaps rejuvenating them could be of significant benefit.

Children are facing a sizable array of temptations that are potentially damaging. Too many are venting their anger on the world or self-harming or falling victim to substance abuse or behaving in ways they will only regret later. Societal



conditions have led to armies of emotionally volatile children who are easy to exploit and impossible to satisfy. They find it hard to see the connection between cause and effect – between what they do and what happens because of what they do and they are quick to shift responsibility for their behaviour by blaming others or pointing to extenuating circumstances as an excuse for their behaviour.

I will leave it to you to decide if targeting each and every problem, each and every social ill that threatens the wellbeing and safety of our children is an ultimately effective strategy. Personally, I don't think so. Better, I believe, to develop a child's capacity to think, reason and analyse, because in the course of daily living the question most frequently asked is, "What is the right thing to do?" The answer invariably is, "It depends" and the more personally and socially capable the child the more likely he or she is to make the right decision.