

Ballarat 7: School Students Return, 2 June 2020

Just over a week ago primary and secondary students in Victoria started returning to their schools. This has been implemented in a staggered fashion with some year levels commencing earlier than others. Prior to this step students of all levels had been doing the educational stuff domestically – digitally and remote, presenting a serious challenge to parents who were now not only confined with their children but were called upon to act as substitute teachers. I could build up the complications here: many mothers and fathers were also trying to work from home, many were single parents, the willing or unwilling assistance of grandparents could not be called on and so on. But let's put some of those social difficulties aside for the present.

In recent years, in Australia, as elsewhere, there has been a worrying tendency to apply the term 'hero' to a wider range of people than has been the case in the past. Interestingly, the term 'heroine' is less used: perhaps this indicates a greater gender equality in our society, perhaps not. Anyway, a lot of people – men and women - now have been elevated to hero status and it is generally via their job, whether that be their actual occupation for which they are paid, or their temporary role in some emergency. So, fire fighters of all sorts, volunteers and professionals, are all heroes, all the time and everywhere – unless they are in a union looking for increased benefits. Nurses are heroes pretty much all the time as are all members of the military. Anybody in the health system has now been canonised. In some countries health workers are clapped in the evening. I don't think that happened here or at least not much.

School teachers can be heroes too – but perhaps not all the time. Their status is more problematic. (University teachers are never heroes, it seems.) Just before schools were closed across Australia, and teachers were struggling with reduced classes, sanitising measures, school authorities dithering between continuing and closure, the educational workforce was seen as doing it tough. Then came the close down and teachers had to prepare for preparing and transmitting lessons from afar – even if that 'afar' wasn't actually that far really. Kids in our street could wave to some of their teachers who were 'broadcasting' from the primary school opposite. Don't wave. Go inside and do your lessons. Bouquets to the staff.

Then, as Australia did not experience the mortality rate of some other countries, the first calls for a return to the classroom began. The Prime Minister, forgetting, or ignoring once again, that Australia has a federal system of government, called for all children to get back to school. When the states and territories did not all immediately fall into line, the ‘national unity’ so trumpeted in the media started to look a little more fragile than its proponents would have liked. Victoria became the target of the right-wing commentariat for not only taking a wrecking ball to the economy, but for delaying school openings and thereby imperilling the education of thousands of children, now and into a distant future. When some teachers or teacher unions queried whether it was safe to populate the classroom again good old political partisanship reappeared. So, Peter Dutton, government hard man and Federal Minister for Home Affairs, rumbled away about Queensland teachers and their dreaded union impeding their students’ progress for selfish reasons – Dutton having recovered from the COVID-19 virus he caught early on in the crisis. The status of teachers was now doubtful again. In the limited contact I had with anybody in May I even heard that old canard: schoolteachers have it easy, look at the short working day, look at all the holidays. Pure nostalgia; so reminiscent of the 1970s when school teachers never came close to being regarded as heroes. I even heard somebody echo Julie Bishop from her days as an extremely undistinguished Federal Minister for Education – teachers pursue Trotskyite agendas. Mum, what’s a Trotskyite?

Then the Andrews government in Victoria announced the graduated return to school I described above. Once more, I can hear from down the road the happy cries of children from the beautiful grounds of Mount Pleasant Primary School. Or I would if it ever stops raining in Ballarat. The poor kids have left the confines of home to another form of confinement as they cannot leave their rain lashed classrooms during the day. But there is good in everything. The local newspaper, the *Ballarat Courier*, one of the few regional publications left after NewsCorp scorched its local journals recently, featured pictures and stories about hard working teachers, who have prepared their hygienic rooms, planned for lost lessons, and are ready to pick up where they had left off. They’re not quite as heroic as health workers but they are definitely back on ‘the front line.’

Within this disruption there are a myriad of personal narratives and here I can insert the almost inevitable personal element. Four of our six children and their partners are school teachers, all in Central Victoria. Three of our four grandchildren are school age. As a result four of our six children and partners had to spend the period in which all schools were shut teaching both remotely and internally, that is to their own children who had hitherto

considered school and home to be two distinct entities. The only one of our grandchildren too young for school asked to be promoted to honorary student status so she too could join in this different sort of lessons. When the day came, and the schools re-opened, her brother and cousins were all anxious and fretting about returning to a physical school. Starting school is, after all, one of those events in our lives that we see as genuinely a transition from something to something else. If something as important as school attendance can be suddenly curtailed, and then enforced again, that is a big thing in a small child's life. Their teachers are now dealing with these alarums. We don't have to clap school teachers, or bandy the term 'hero' about but I reckon they have probably earned their money lately.

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