

Teachers and Curriculum



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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that:

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- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
- review books that have a curriculum focus.

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REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN NEW ZEALAND

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Change is currently a key priority in educational policy making and in schools in most Western countries. Because learning is essential to human growth and development, educational systems and institutions often have heavy burdens placed on them by society. They become the means by which young people can develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will enable them to function in society as adults. So they are an obvious target for change initiatives designed to assist governments meet the goals seen as most appropriate at any particular time. Over the past twenty years, the pressure for major change has accelerated and the timeframes for implementation have shortened. It may help to take a longer view.

Often change is portrayed by policy makers as entirely positive, synonymous with improvement. It may carry millenarian overtones: change to curriculum, change in teacher attitude or behaviour, change in understanding the processes of learning will lead us to the promised land. To get there may be painful, but with goal setting and support the targets can be reached. Implementing change has become a major industry with its own research field and educational practitioners are classified as 'early adopters' who lead the way or 'resisters' who have to be prodded to adopt new technologies or new ways of thinking. Educational leaders are urged to become change agents and learn skills to ensure that all their staff are engaged in changing their practice in line with approved policy emphases. In some countries, such as the UK and the US, mandated change has been highly prescriptive. In England, the imposition of the literacy and numeracy hours prescribed both teaching approaches and the times to be allotted to them. In the US, the *No Child Left Behind* policies with their drastic consequences for schools that do not meet externally set targets, have severely curtailed space for professional judgement and local responsiveness.

New Zealand education has resisted much of this extremism, in part because of its size and the ease with which different groups can communicate with each other. For example, teachers have been spared the rigid national testing of students, which has altered teaching in classes of students as young as seven in England. For the past two years, I have been involved in the evaluation of an initiative to raise reading achievement in primary schools. Those working in the project have adopted a common methodology but assist schools to make their own decisions, set their own targets and work to achieve them. This is a more appropriate model for implementing change than many overseas developments.

CHANGE OVER TIME IN NZ EDUCATION

Planned large-scale shifts in education take time, concerted will, and a conducive climate. In New Zealand, major educational reform agendas are not new but not all changes have been explicitly designed. Sometimes it is easier to see their shape and underlying assumptions in hindsight. Changes have occurred as a result of shifts in beliefs about the purpose and direction of education, of responses to changing social, cultural and economic circumstances, both national and international, and of shifts in beliefs about the capacity of individuals to benefit from different forms of education. Most change has occurred gradually as new ideas became more widely adopted, new research or resources were disseminated, and new cohorts of teachers who grew up in differing circumstances entered the profession.

C.E. Beeby (1986), looking back over a century of New Zealand education, identified three controlling ideas or 'myths' that underpinned our education system up to the 1980s. The Education Act of 1877 was premised on the belief that New Zealand needed to provide basic education for all children but assumed that most

of them would not proceed beyond the primary level. Only the most intellectually able would go on to secondary school. Beeby considered this phase was predicated on the survival of the fittest. This reflected a pioneer society with limited resources, a belief in opportunity, but little questioning of social implications of policy. George Hogben, as Director of Education, rewrote the curriculum largely by himself, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in an effort to provide more freedom for teachers and enjoyment for pupils. While he encouraged the development of technical education, he maintained the basic tenets of the English curriculum and did not question the assumption that more specialised academic instruction was for the able few.

The second major phase began without official policy support. Professor James Shelley, fresh from the University of Manchester, burst on the educational scene in Canterbury in 1920 full of exciting plans to foster holistic education, to encourage the importance of the arts in education, to link hand and mind, and to provide for the ongoing education of adults. For the students, mainly teachers in the making, who were exposed to his lectures at Canterbury College or at WEA classes, he swept away notions of conformity and rigidity and opened up new possibilities. Beeby believed Shelley was responsible for the second educational myth, the education of the whole child.

This concept was strengthened by The New Education Fellowship Conference in 1937. This conference, attended by nearly 6000 teachers and members of the public across four cities, introduced a generation of teachers to Susan Isaacs' child-centred education and Lismers' ideas on art. The international speakers impressed Minister of Education, Peter Fraser, who attended lectures and consulted the experts on the appointment of new leadership in the Department of Education. At grassroots level, numbers of study groups were set up across the country where teachers could debate and talk about new ideas, and new learning in their classrooms was a result.

The vision statement articulated by Fraser and Beeby in 1939 remains a powerful statement of the intent of the reforming Labour Government first elected in 1935. It affirmed education as a basic right for all children, no matter what their circumstances. The statement also presaged sweeping changes to the secondary curriculum to make it more accessible. Beeby labelled this as the 'myth' of equality of opportunity.

This 'myth' gradually became widely accepted and was reinforced in the aftermath of World War II when education for citizenship and international understanding were seen as key strategies for preventing further conflicts and loss of life. The reform process was stymied, however, since the pressure of providing sufficient teachers and buildings to cater for the baby boom generation meant resources for professional and curriculum development were scarcer. The 1950s and 1960s saw an increased international emphasis on science in the wake of the Soviet launch of Sputnik and consequent fears in the West of communist technical superiority. The 1970s saw the rise of feminism and a Māori renaissance with emphasis on *te reo* and *tikanga*, which challenged existing curricula, attitudes and ways of teaching as well as the gendered, monocultural schooling, which New Zealanders had largely taken for granted.

By the 1980s, administrators (Renwick, 1986) were acknowledging that the espoused equality of opportunity, which had been the aim of New Zealand education since 1939, had failed to achieve equality of outcomes. Large numbers of young people were leaving school at 15 without qualifications and in some cases with levels of literacy and numeracy inadequate for citizenship or work. These young people were predominantly from lower socio-economic groups; Māori and Pacific students were over-represented. Social justice demanded a new and more nuanced approach.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

The 1980s and 1990s gave us accountability, teacher quality and competition, as education came to be seen as underpinning national economic performance. International surveys of educational achievement in literacy, mathematics and science have come to dominate our thinking and the gap exposed between top achievers and the bottom 20% of our school population has been the catalyst for more change.

At the same time, our educational goals have become significantly more ambitious and our school populations much more diverse. Not only have we become aware of the need to respond sensitively to the needs of Māori and Pasifika children but

also some schools enrol children from more than 50 other countries. Schools are expected to ensure that all students reach particular levels of achievement and that the individual learning needs of each of them are met. A wider range of assessment tools allows for more exact measurement of performance. Students who were once educated in special schools have in many cases been mainstreamed. The complexity involved in providing for what Beeby might well have identified as the fourth 'myth', providing individualised learning programmes in diverse classrooms, is a major challenge. In such a context, it is not surprising that policy makers exhibit a sense of urgency. Nevertheless, there are major dilemmas and dangers as well as opportunities for those who work in and with schools around change processes.

THE ALLURE OF TRANSFORMATION

Change is often sold on the grounds that it will be transformative, that while the present situation is unsatisfactory, solutions exist that will ensure a radical difference. Popular television programmes show individuals changing their appearance and, by implication, their lives. Self-help books and DVDs abound, claiming to provide sure-fire methods for individuals to take control of their lives by eliminating negative thoughts, keeping a journal, undertaking physical or mental exercise, taking a course, ingesting miracle food or pills, or joining organisations. But transformation cannot keep occurring, as the faces of those who have undergone repeated plastic surgery show. St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus may have been life-changing but it set his direction for the rest of his life. And if transformation truly occurs, a further transformation might entail a return to the starting point.

For education the transformation promise can be alluring, particularly to policy makers spurred by politicians or community pressure groups. But the allure is false. Transformation implies arriving at a new order, a stasis or utopia. But in reality new paradigms appear and are in turn superseded. Transformation also demands that we leave behind and negate previous knowledge and practice, rather than building on it. For education this is dangerous territory as it implies that current professional practice has nothing to recommend it, sending messages to teachers and students that their work has not been worthwhile.

TOP DOWN OR BOTTOM UP: THREE EXAMPLES

Systemic change is normally initiated from the top but it may well build on a groundswell of opinion shift initiated from the ranks of teachers. The conference on *Education and the Equality of the Sexes* held in Wellington in 1975 was organised by the Department of Education, in conjunction with a group of women anxious to address the disparities which had become increasingly obvious between the opportunities open to young women and young men, and the messages which were being conveyed by the curriculum and school resources they studied. Following that conference, the Department agreed to review textbooks and early readers for gender bias, and to promote programmes that would raise the aspirations and assumptions of young women. At the same time, it sponsored leadership programmes for women and funded research into barriers to women's leadership in education. Ginger groups within the major educational unions worked to provide awareness issues in the education of girls, their consequent career aspirations and the leadership of women. Thirty years on, there have indeed been major shifts in curriculum and career choice and it is now boys' achievement that is of concern. Major social attitudes have also changed. But some things have been beyond the scope of educational change to alter. Women still experience a salary differential outside the public sector. In education, as in society more widely, women are under-represented in management and governance, especially at higher levels.

Currently, schools are preparing to implement a new New Zealand Curriculum (2007). For many teachers, who have been involved in the development and consultation over its form, the change will not be dramatic and they may already be working to develop key competencies or consulting with the local community about aspects of curriculum. The curriculum revision was undertaken after a comprehensive research exercise exploring how the previous curriculum document had worked in practice and what teachers found helpful and what they found difficult to implement. The findings of this study, that the curriculum was too crowded and had too many objectives, were one starting point for the revision process. While the new document is officially top down, it again builds on teacher and community feedback. It is an evolution rather than a revolution.

Over the past two decades there have also been major changes to our assumptions and practice around assessment of student learning: its purpose and form. Again

this is not a new phenomenon. For much of our educational history, school and university teachers have fought for greater control over the assessment of their students' achievement. Initially inspectors made all the decisions about moving children from one 'standard' to the next, based on their examination of work during visits to schools. Eventually, principals assumed the responsibility, but it took until 1936 for the abolition of the proficiency examination, which certified a student's readiness to proceed to the secondary level. Later, secondary teachers queried the validity of a single national examination, initially set by the university, to validate fitness to move on to the next level. Experiments from the 1970s to develop standard-based assessment, to allow individual paper credits for School Certificate, to abolish the University Entrance examination in favour of Sixth Form Certificate changed the assessment landscape. At the same time, researchers and teachers together explored the capacity of formative assessment to assist student learning. However, the revolution of the early 1990s, as NZQA began to develop and then impose new unit standards and later the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, has provided examples of more contested top down change, which teachers were trained to implement. Ironically, this change took place in a political context that championed individualism and competition. But teacher reservations were treated as wilful resistance. And as Locke (2007) has indicated, the approach also pre-empted curriculum development.

CONCLUSION

Change itself is inevitable. Our students undergo dramatic physical, cognitive and emotional change from early childhood through to early adulthood and beyond. Change also occurs all the time as we respond to our environment. New technical developments have revolutionised our ways of communicating with each other and will continue to challenge our current notions of literacy. Climate change has the potential to impose radical alterations on our lifestyles. Teachers are influenced by ideas picked up in reading or developed through working and reflecting with colleagues. Educational change is a slippery concept and not easy to 'manage'.

Perhaps the best way for governments and bureaucracies to promote change in education is by setting high-level goals and directions and providing resources to support these. The role of school principals is much more hands on but is also, in part, about providing a climate and framework in which teachers in a particular context are encouraged to discuss, share experiences, learn and grow. A recent book, *Teachers in the Middle* (Smythe & McInerney, 2007) provides a series of case studies of middle schooling in South Australia; the teachers concerned are providing significantly different experiences for their students at this level. The extent to which total school organisation enabled or stymied the change and innovation was a key factor in the success of the programmes. Each school was different.

Transformation through prescription and fiat is impossible. Change is complex and difficult to measure, even over time. It involves complex interaction among officials, teachers, students and parents. It may depend on the availability of resources. I have just read Doris Lessing's (2007) moving speech on accepting her Nobel Prize award. She tells of students and teachers in Zimbabwe, hungry for literacy and learning to read from labels on cans since many schools have no books. It depends on social acceptance of key underlying values. Some policy evaluators suggest that reforms seeking significant gains in practice should be measured over a period of ten years (Sabatier, 1991). Beeby believed that change could take a generation. While we evaluate the results of specific programmes and initiatives, a balanced assessment of our efforts to work towards the 'myth' of individualised learning for diverse students in a multicultural society may not be possible till mid-century.

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