

**Auckland Primary Principals' Association Conference**

**Today's Schools for  
Tomorrow's Children**

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## **TODAY'S SCHOOLS FOR TOMORROW'S CHILDREN**

My brief is to speak about the knowledge, skills and values that children need to acquire in today's primary schools to prepare them for tomorrow's world. I shall also touch on the second theme of your conference, the means of evaluating the effectiveness of schools.

I make no claim to professional authority about curriculum matters or evaluation procedures. But while I work in industry, I do not propose to adopt a narrow industrial orientation. This conference is about primary education for all children, only some of whom will enter the world of industry and commerce. We are not, fortunately, in some Orwellian world where young children are allocated a specific role for adult life and trained accordingly. What I want to say about primary education is, in my view, applicable to all children whatever their ultimate destinations. In any case, the sorts of skill, knowledge and personal attitudes and values that are sought in industry are very much the same as those we value in other walks of life. Job related skills can usually be taught separately, and are often best taught on-the-job.

We are talking today about children who will typically be leaving the formal education system some time in the first decade of the twenty-first century and, if present arrangements continue, will start to retire about the middle of the century. This observation about the time horizon of our conference poses the first major question: "What sort of world beyond formal education will our primary children be entering?" The second and consequential question is: "What should our primary schools be doing to prepare our children for that world?"

### **Tomorrow's world**

What will tomorrow's world look like? I have no monopoly on crystal balls. But for all the inherent difficulties, we should be trying to make some intelligent assumptions about the future and basing our plans on them. That is what we seek to do in business and what, I assume, happens in education.

Short of some sort of global catastrophe, we can, I suggest, usefully base our assumptions on the continuance of technological and social trends and on what we know about future demographic changes. Let me list some likely trends.

- ***Technological change and advances in knowledge***

This proceeds at an exponential rate. I have very little idea where it will take the human race by the middle of the next century. But I have little doubt that, well before that time, the primary children of today will look back on our present computers and information and communication systems in the same way that we look back on thatched cottages, the horse and buggy, silent movies, black and white TV and wind-up clocks.

- ***International competition***

It is a much more competitive world than even twenty years ago. There are now major new economies with which New Zealand business has to compete. The apron strings that tied us to 'mother England' for just about all that we produced have been well and truly cut, and will not be retied.

- ***New trade relationships***

The changed and still rapidly changing trading situation has forced us to develop new relationships, especially in the Pacific basin and South East Asia.

- ***Globalisation***

An unattractive word, but one which forces us increasingly to think of New Zealand as part of a world wide community in terms of trade, investment, security, and the environment. We are coming to realise how small the world really is and how, for example, industrial pollution in one country can affect the quality of life in another. Chernobyl was a graphic illustration of this.

- ***Changing social structures and relationships***

The traditional roles of women and men have changed enormously over the last few decades. Mainstreaming seeks to integrate into school and society those who, for a variety of reasons, were previously kept apart from the rest of the population. The Treaty of Waitangi has been 'rediscovered' and its implications for much government activity, including schooling, are still being worked out. The extended family has given way to the nuclear family which seems to be giving way to the one-parent family and, for too many unfortunate children, to what is in practice a no-parent family. Strong structures of the past such as marae and church are now only attended by small minorities.

- ***Demographic changes***

We have been through a process of rapid urbanisation which has posed particular difficulties of adjustment for Maori. I don't know whether urbanisation will continue. The search for quality of life and the development of electronic communications may halt or even reverse the trend. We can be more confident about other demographic factors. The population is getting older. And the percentage of our school population who are Maori or Pacific Islanders is increasing.

### **Consequences for the curriculum**

All this places additional pressure on schools. Schools are urged:

- to teach the languages and cultures of our new trading partners, and to provide education about the environment;
- to educate children about technology and the many new areas of knowledge that science has uncovered;
- to provide a wider range of courses to cater for the ability and interest range represented in the senior secondary school;

- to fill the gap left by traditional social structures in such matters as moral education and parenting skills;
- to provide programmes that are mainstreamed, non-sexist, non-racist, and which provide for the vocationally oriented; and
- to ensure that programmes are bicultural and multicultural.

Some of these pressures may not affect primary schools, but I suspect that most do. How should primary schools respond to these additional demands, each one of which is intrinsically important? Can schools cope with the additional curriculum demands within the constraints of timetabling? If not, how should they set priorities?

It seems to me that there are at least two difficulties about an incrementalist approach to curriculum planning - that is, of loading more and more topics on to the curriculum without evaluating them and assigning priorities against the basic aims of schooling.

The first difficulty is that incremental increases may weaken the ability of schools to deliver core services. We have an expression in business - "sticking to one's knitting". It's not a bad maxim, and those who ignore it do so at their peril - the commercial landscape post October 1987 is littered with examples. It means that firms which extend into areas about which they know little are likely to founder. The viability of the firm will be further reduced if its expertise in traditional activities is diverted to new areas, thus weakening its ability to maintain its traditional strengths. So my caution to education leaders is: "Be clear about where your strengths and expertise lie, be clear about your core business, and be very cautious about moving beyond it".

The second potential source of problems is that it concentrates on inputs. This is, of course, a traditional approach. The curriculum approach seems to me to be essentially an input approach. The extent of the curriculum has varied considerably over the centuries. I understand England in earlier times had the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). This was replaced in Renaissance times by the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric). The new English and Welsh curriculum centres around a number of 'foundation' subjects of which English, maths and science are 'core' subjects.

New Zealand has long had a national curriculum consisting of subject syllabuses. It is now in the process of producing a new curriculum framework consisting of principles, essential learning areas and skills, objectives and assessment procedures. It seems to me to be a very useful development that we are now putting into a curriculum document both the essential learning areas **and** the essential skills which students should acquire in their school years. This looks both at the input side of school life in terms of the learning experiences and subject matter to which students should be exposed **and** the output side in terms of the skills, attitudes and values with which they should emerge from school.

### **The purposes of schooling**

So what are the purposes of primary schooling and what attitudes, values and skills should primary school children acquire? When a former headmaster of Eton was asked by an anxious mother what he prepared his boys for, his answer was short,

unequivocal and pious: "Death, madam, death". Today's concerns are likely to be with the here and now rather than the hereafter. The debate about the purpose of education generally ranges between the cultivation of the individual, the integration of people into society, the transformation of society or aspects of it, and the needs of the economy. Many groups advance their own particular perceptions and interests.

I don't propose to get into this debate about the purposes of schooling. But I would make one point which is that I don't myself see any great contradiction or tension between society and the economy. It seems to me to be unhelpful to view people **either** as members of the paid workforce **or** as members of the broader New Zealand society. People have many roles in life - child, student, parent, homemaker, paid employee, consumer, taxpayer, member of various community organisations, and so on. To concentrate on the preparation of the child for one role without taking into account the many others would be to flatten out people's lives into some sort of Mercator's projection, providing a very distorted picture of reality.

But it would be consistent with what I have said for schools to take note and adjust to changing situations in society, including its economic aspects. If, as is the case in my view, New Zealand has been living in a fool's paradise far too long, protected from external economic realities by overseas borrowing, there may well be a case for changing the priority schools and tertiary institutions give to the role of education as a preparation for employment. And the same is, of course, true for other developments such as the changing roles of men and women in society which require a more gender-inclusive curriculum than we have had in the past.

### **The role of primary education**

It seems to me that primary school education provides the essential foundation for just about every form of education and training that follows. Foundations are generally not conspicuous - *until things go wrong*. An inadequate foundation results in cracks in the edifice above and limitations on the weight of the structure that can be built without fear of failure. Children who have had a good primary education will have, to a limited but nonetheless vitally important extent, the basic knowledge, skills and values that will serve them in years to come in respect of every role they undertake. Much can, with confidence, be built upon it. I would particularly stress the understandings and skills that enable people to play an independent and responsible role in society.

To play such a role in the society of today and, as far as we can foresee, of tomorrow, people need to read well and to understand all sorts of information presented in many different media. They need to understand instructions, to read advertisements, to use libraries and other information sources. All this is necessary in order to find jobs, houses, make travel arrangements, use office and household machines, and so on. And just as important, perhaps even more so, people need to express themselves in clear, unambiguous ways in speech and on paper. People also need basic numeracy skills if they are to compare prices, to measure and compute for laying a carpet or making a set of shelves, and to carry out a hundred and one ordinary, everyday home and job tasks.

Without this foundation, people are unable to lead satisfying lives - in the work place, as participants in a democratic form of government, and in much of social life.

As we are talking about life and life chances in our own society, it will, of course, be important to acquire knowledge relevant to living and working in this society. This must involve learning about our history, geography and cultures. Without this information, people cannot participate independently and responsibly in our democratic way of life.

The transmission of our cultural heritage is, in my view, a special responsibility of schools and one which should be started in primary schools. It is through this heritage that individuals and communities come to maturity. The great minds of the past have grappled with the deep questions about the meaning of life, the distinctions between good and evil, human responsibilities and capabilities, and so on. Culture also provides what the Australian educationalist Dame Leonie Kramer calls a sense of common inherited experience<sup>1</sup>. She likens the absence of a sense of cultural inheritance with the loss of memory. Both result in the loss of a sense of the past, of belonging, of identity, and of the accumulated experience and wisdom on which to draw for advice and guidance. She concludes:

"(Young children) can begin to absorb their cultural heritage through poetry, songs, and those myths and legends which have universal meaning, and which both capture and enrich the imagination... For in the end, we are denying them the means to continue their education for themselves, and that zest for living which is one of the many gifts of - in Matthew Arnold's words - "the best that has been known and thought in the world"."

In this, we all have a good deal to learn from Maori people who are giving much attention to the recovery and development of their own culture. By contrast, non-Maori educators seem to be very reluctant to embrace their own English, European and classical inheritance which is of such enormous richness and variety.

The importance presently attached to values education in schools reflects, I suspect, changes in society over recent decades which have led to increasing uncertainty about whether there is any one moral code that should be adopted by all citizens. This poses a problem because the instilling of moral principles and behaviours is clearly an essential aim of any school. This has, as far as I am aware, always been a prime aim of education in all societies. There are fortunately still a large number of values and attitudes which virtually all New Zealanders can agree are desirable for the good of our community. The national curriculum discussion document lists some of them including integrity, reliability, trust, fairness, and courtesy. I suspect that there are others on which we could all agree.

I doubt if values need to be or should be formally taught at the primary level as a classroom subject. The instilling of values is rather an everyday matter, and one not just for the classroom but also for the corridors and playgrounds. It is set by the example of staff more than by precept. Moral education should take place through all activities of the school and not be reduced to a separate subject divorced from the rest of school life and - what would be far worse - inconsistent with the rest of school life.

While there is uncertainty about values in our pluralist society, I note that some particular values are being pressed very strongly by some groups within the

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer L., *Regaining our Heritage*, *IPA Review*, August-October, 1988.

education community. This was very evident in the curriculum review report of 1987. Personally, I have little problem with many of the values that were expressed in that document. I would, however, stress that there is not much point in turning out ideologically progressive and sensitive individuals if they are ill-equipped to participate in society. Such a grounding is no substitute for the hard work involved in acquiring fluency in spoken and written English, basic numeracy, and a sense of cultural inheritance. Those who leave school ill-prepared for modern life, including the world of paid employment, are likely to become disappointed, frustrated and bitter adults.

My reference to foundation building may seem both obvious and to take a narrow view of primary school education. I would agree, of course, that some children will show great promise and progress very fast. Their needs must also be taken care of. Yet the foundation to which I refer is the *sine qua non* for any significant participation in much of modern life. Its provision is the essential endowment which primary schools must give to each generation. Of course the foundations will not be completed in primary school. But important elements of the foundations should be well laid by the time the child leaves. This process opens up opportunities for the individual in later life, including opportunities at secondary school, which will otherwise be closed. There are, of course, second and subsequent chances for those who fail early, but recovery from failure in those critical early years is so much more difficult. I suspect that relatively few in such a situation ever fully recover.

I don't know how many children enter secondary school without a good foundation of skills and knowledge. I am not aware of any information about, for example, the proportion of children entering Form 3 who, after several years in a New Zealand primary school, have a significant reading or numeracy problem which is not explicable in terms of some physical, psychological or mental impairment. Such children are clearly failures of the primary school system. At an average cost of about \$2,600<sup>2</sup> per year per child, eight years of primary education will have cost society some \$21,000 for each of these children with very little return. And this is only the cost of primary schooling. Additional costs in terms of subsequent retraining may raise this figure very considerably.

Many of you will have a far better appreciation of the situation than I have. Secondary school teachers to whom I talk often refer to the difficulty they have with children who enter their schools scarcely capable of reading or writing and knowing little of arithmetic. Evidence like this, from a tiny sample of secondary schools and their teachers, is at best impressionistic. But some confirmation that we do have a problem comes from fellow employers who have difficulty in finding workers who are functionally literate and numerate. I would add that even graduates with excellent university grades often have very poor grammatical skills and cannot be trusted to write a letter without supervision.

An Australian academic noted in 1988 that one of the few areas of employment that was expanding in Australian universities at that time was remedial studies. He noted that those undergraduates who needed assistance were not typically those who spoke English as a second language or who had been granted entrance as mature or special

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<sup>2</sup> There were 407,536 children in primary schools (Juniors to Form 2 excluding private primary schools) at July 1990. The vote for state primary schools in 1991/92 is \$1,077,289,000. Source: Ministry of Education and 1991/92 Estimates.

entrants, but people who had spent 12 or 13 years in school immediately before entry and had satisfied normal entry requirements.<sup>3</sup> The problem of undergraduate illiteracy does not appear to be confined to Australia. It was reported in *The Dominion*<sup>4</sup> a few years ago that the Auckland University's law school was sending its entire intake to remedial English classes. The students' shortcomings were attributed to the way English had been taught in the early 1970s. In a letter to *Metro* of April 1990, a polytechnic tutor wrote that he was appalled at the standard of English used in assignments by many recent school leavers who were supposed to have been top students.

The evidence as to the extent of poorly laid foundations is inadequate. However, it is, I suggest, clear that the cost of poorly laid foundations is high. There are costs to the individual in terms of opportunities lost and repair work undertaken. And there are costs for society in the loss of economic productivity and the taxpayer contribution to educational repair work.

The changes within New Zealand and in the rest of the world to which I referred earlier reinforce, in my view, the importance of the foundations. The danger is that the changes in the world outside school may distract you from your core business. Learning about the environment and other languages and cultures should not erode the emphasis that is required on accurate and clear English. Scientific and technological advance should not reduce the need for basic numeracy. The specialisation of science and the advance of knowledge generally has led to all sorts of artificial divides within science and between science and the humanities. I would encourage you to maintain an integrated approach against pressures to divide up knowledge into increasingly small and specialised pieces.

### **Evaluating the effectiveness of schools**

This brings me to the subject of school effectiveness and ways of evaluating it. The evaluation of a school must be based on the learning and skill development of the children that pass through it. The assessment of children raises, I understand, many technical matters of which I am ignorant such as the effects assessment may have on the process of teaching and learning. I look forward to reading James Irving's paper as I am sure he will provide authoritative guidance in what is, for me, largely uncharted territory.

#### **- *Assessing the achievement of children***

My basic proposition is that parents are entitled to have reliable, credible and reasonably full information about how their children are progressing. Especially at the primary level, education should be very much a partnership between teacher and parents. To be an effective partnership, the partners need to communicate. Parents need to know what their child knows and can do and, perhaps more importantly, what the child is finding difficult. More than this, all parents want to know how their child is performing in terms of what is expected for his or her age. There is little point in having information about actual performance if it is unrelated to what should be expected. Without this latter type of information, parents and teachers may come to

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<sup>3</sup> Partington G, "What do our children know? A study of Educational Standards", *Australian Institute for Public Policy*, Policy Paper No. 12, 1988, p.30.

<sup>4</sup> *The Dominion*, 3 May 1987.

totally unrealistic conclusions about the child's ability or industry, and make unwarranted decisions about its next best steps in schooling.

This may not sound much to ask. Such assessment should surely be part and parcel of everyday schooling. My impression is, however, that assessment is far from rigorous or regular in many schools and that often the only reporting to parents is a term report with little more than one word descriptions such as 'good', 'fair' and so on. If my impression is an accurate reflection of what goes on - or rather doesn't go on - in many primary schools, then there is a serious problem to address.

I am on much more solid ground in referring to the lack of training in assessment procedures at colleges of education. The expert working party that wrote the discussion document *Assessment for Better Learning* stated that:

"There is strong evidence that teachers are not well prepared to handle the professional demands of existing assessment procedures, let alone those associated with the new (achievement based) approach".

In its final report *Tomorrow's Standards*, the same working party added:

"We accept that existing programmes in teacher training are deficient in terms of time allocated and the nature of courses offered. A Working Party survey of such programmes revealed that, in general, coverage of assessment issues and techniques was at best patchy and clearly a low priority.

Respondents to the discussion document also noted this deficiency in such terms as "massive teacher training is needed" and "teachers' colleges do a dismal job of preparing students to undertake classroom assessment".

There are also indications, within the content of existing programmes and in respondents' comments, that expertise in assessment is lacking in the colleges."

This seems to me to be a serious state of affairs. According to this expert working party, not only are many new teachers inadequately prepared for the classroom but at least some of the colleges themselves do not have the necessary assessment expertise. How can we have any confidence that the colleges are adequately assessing their own students' competence to perform in the classroom? I wonder whether the Teachers Registration Board is registering teacher college graduates who have had inadequate or no training in pupil assessment. That, in my lay understanding, would be like registering as doctors medical graduates whose training totally omitted any reference to the digestive system or the circulation of blood. And are boards of trustees hiring the graduates of such colleges? Perhaps this is an over-reaction and either the position is not as serious as I interpret it to be or the matter has since been rectified. I should be happy to be reassured.

- ***Evaluating the effectiveness of schools***

I am not qualified to comment on the proposals in the national curriculum discussion draft that national testing be undertaken in all primary schools at certain stages. I understand that there are arguments both ways. On the one hand it is argued that such testing could be intrusive, technically difficult and expensive to manage, and

likely to distort the curriculum. On the other hand it might provide useful information about the performance of both children and schools. For prospective parents, it might assist in decisions about which school to choose for their children. I would be interested in hearing argument about where the balance of advantage lies.

Whatever the answer on national testing of primary school children, we do need better information than is available now for assessing the effectiveness of primary schools. This should be primarily a task of the school board. My main concern is whether a school's trustees have the information on which to make sound judgments about the performance of their school and, in particular, about the performance of their chief executive - the school principal. The evaluations of the Education Review Office will assist, but these are, I understand, infrequent - every three years - and cannot provide the ongoing monitoring that is required. From this perspective, reliable data from national monitoring of school performance would be of great value. I accept that to be reliable such information would need to allow for the background characteristics of the school community.

The availability of reliable information about the performance of schools is vital. But there is not much advantage in having reliable information that, for example, one's local school is performing poorly if there is little or nothing that can be done about it. It would avoid a lot of frustration to remain ignorant! From the perspective of school boards, it is important that there is flexibility to change their professional leadership if this is indicated. And principals need the ability to build up a teaching staff that shares a common vision for their school and can achieve common aims. This points to contract employment arrangements, clearly specified performance criteria, regular reviews and so on. This is all part of any well-run business, and schools are organisations which are far too important to be excluded from ongoing management and performance monitoring.

A school's monitoring of its progress may well, I suggest, indicate that a different staffing profile would improve its performance. Or that the balance of resources between staffing and other operational expenditures should be altered. As I understand it, this flexibility has been offered to schools but only some 50 out of our 2700 state schools have accepted. I find this disappointing but not totally surprising. When many protective devices were removed from New Zealand industries in the mid-1980s, many senior executives were far from enthusiastic about their new freedoms and the responsibilities that went with them. Many who were successful in a protected business environment were unable to adjust to an open, competitive one. There have been major changes in the management of New Zealand business as a consequence.

From my own perspective, the new freedoms and responsibilities have been enormously beneficial for New Zealand industry - and were long overdue. We have adjusted to the new situation very quickly. It would, incidentally, be quite inconceivable that my company's board would tell me what staff I could hire, lay down their salary ranges, and stop me transferring funds between salaries and equipment. If these restrictions were imposed on me, I could not be held accountable for my group's performance. Either I have flexibility on the input side to achieve agreed outputs or I haven't. If I have the required flexibility, I can be held fully accountable. If I haven't, then my responsibility is limited and shared with those who have made the decisions for me. This makes it very difficult to apportion responsibility - and very easy to shift and evade it. I would encourage you to take

whatever opportunities the politicians and bureaucrats offer you by way of additional flexibility to perform your task. Centralising tendencies are strong in any administration and the opportunities may not last forever. You need to seize them when you can.

Some of you may by now be itching to tell me that schooling is different from business, that education is not a commodity, and so on. Yes, in some ways it is different, and proper account should be taken of those differences. But in terms of the need for clear accountability mechanisms, I would have thought that there is no difference. This was the view of the Picot Committee which discussed what it considered to be a number of "serious weaknesses" in the previous administrative arrangements, including the lack of accountability that arises when clear objectives and clear responsibility and control over the resources available to meet those objectives are lacking. Nearly four years later, and with some 70 percent of your resources still centrally controlled for all but a handful of schools, we do not appear to have moved much further.

For many parents, there would appear to be little they can presently do to express the dissatisfaction they may feel with the performance of their local school. Electing a different set of trustees is possible, but elections only take place every three years and the outcomes cannot readily be predicted. Choice within the state system is limited in larger population centres by transport facilities and in smaller centres by the lack of alternatives. For parents of primary age children, ease and safety of access is critical. I have not heard of any cases of groups of parents setting up a separate state school under the procedures outlined in the government's policy statement *Tomorrow's Schools*. Private alternatives seem unlikely to be available to the less well off because of the low level of government subsidy. Issues of parental choice of school go beyond the scope of this conference. But I hope I have made it clear that there is not much point in giving people information if they cannot act on it. To do otherwise will lead to frustration and apathy.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude. The future, it seems to me, offers less and less to those who are not secure in spoken and written English, and who do not have a basic numeracy, a sense of cultural inheritance and the values and knowledge associated with them. In the past, we could provide jobs for all school leavers even if, in terms of formal schooling, they were clearly failures. This is no longer the case and it seems unlikely that the former situation will return.

The role of primary schools in providing a solid, secure foundation for effective participation in modern life is critical. The changes going on in our society and the world mean that their role in laying the foundations is of increasing importance. The prospects are bleak for those who do not have this foundation. The cost of failure to acquire this preparation for life is high. So my simple message is: "stick to your knitting". You can give your children the best possible start to life by providing them with this foundation. The changes in the world enhance the importance of your traditional role. Be careful that those changes do not distract you from it. I can think of no task that is more important for the future of New Zealand.