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**PLIMMERTON ROTARY CLUB**

**WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT  
EDUCATION**

**ROGER KERR  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
NEW ZEALAND BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE**

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## WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EDUCATION

My topic today is school education. In spite of all the talk of 'reforms', our schools sector is, in my view, still one of the least reformed parts of our society. And what reform there has been has often been deeply flawed. We need to do much more – and differently. I want to explain why I hold these views.

For many years New Zealand has been complacent about the performance of its schools. Sure, there were recognised problem areas. For example the performance of Maori children was well below that of the rest of the population. And there was an uncomfortable feeling that we were not all that hot at maths. But these areas were seen only to need 'tweaking' – not serious reform – and, of course, lots more money, and the problems would then go away. Our schools and our teachers are, after all, the best in the world. Or at least that has been the rhetoric.

My perception is that for some years now this complacency has been wearing very thin. The general population has been concerned, as evidenced by many comments in the media. What have been some of the symptoms?

First, our standard of grammar has been a particular cause of much concern. A few years ago Emeritus Professor Wallie Clark of the University of Canterbury wrote of the 30 years of neglect and depreciation of the rigorous teaching of English which has resulted in university students who are unable to get their thoughts down on paper.<sup>1</sup> The process involved the rejection in schools of discrimination on the basis of ability and the introduction of social promotion, and teaching across wide ability ranges. Difficult subjects, including English, became optional. Accreditation allowed disclosure of incompetence in English to be avoided if achievement in other subjects was passable. Professor Clark went on to note that the situation worsened as the products of the changed system became teachers themselves and, having little understanding of syntax and grammar, simply passed on their ignorance to the next generation of students.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Press*, 2 November 1994.

I noted a letter in *The Dominion* a few years ago from somebody who had, presumably, missed out on grammar at school and who wanted to make good the deficiency in later life.<sup>2</sup> He had rung all the local secondary schools and the Correspondence School in the hope of finding a tutor. The typical answer was "We don't have staff who understand grammar, let alone teach it". Well, at least the answers were refreshingly honest.

Should this loss of grammar worry us? George Orwell was clear that it should.<sup>3</sup> The English language, he said, "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." In other words, it is a two-way process: poor language skills lead to poor thinking which further impoverishes language.

What about reading? In recent years empirical studies have shown that while New Zealand primary children do well internationally in reading, we also have an unusually long tail of poor performers. That our poor levels of English teaching at school is no new phenomenon is evident from a recent report on adult illiteracy which, in effect, measured the outcomes of several decades of New Zealand education.<sup>4</sup> Only about half our adults were found to operate at a literacy level considered necessary for meeting the demands of everyday life (in Sweden about three-quarters were found to operate at this level). Of particular concern was the high proportion – about one in five – of adults with very poor literacy skills.

Then there is general knowledge. We don't seem to be teaching our children very much actual knowledge. There is a natural and proper concern to ensure that children don't grow up with an obsession with facts to the exclusion of everything else. Thomas Gradgrind, the schoolmaster in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, insisted that: "Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out every thing else." We would share Louisa Gradgrind's concern for the "graces of the soul", "the sentiments of the heart" and all the other "inappreciable things that raise [life] from the state of conscious death". In more down-to-earth language, theory, analytical

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<sup>2</sup> *The Dominion*, 21 January 1995.

<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale and other Essays'.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education, *Adult Literacy in New Zealand*, Ministry of Education, Wellington, undated (probably 1997).

ability, scientific method and aesthetic appreciation matter too. But in New Zealand this seems to have mutated into a belief that we don't need facts at all.

A survey of students at the University of Canterbury conducted a year or so ago revealed the most alarming ignorance among our top students about the world around us. Some 10 percent of those surveyed thought that the sun rises in the west, 60 percent couldn't identify Gutenberg as having made the first printing press (some thought George Gershwin was the inventor), and a quarter thought the Vietnam war preceded the Korean war. Denis Dutton of the University of Canterbury suggested that this level of ignorance among our top students reflects a successful attack by the politically correct against 'traditional' notions of memorisation and recitation and by those who decry anything that lacks vocational relevance.<sup>5</sup>

Where do we stand on literature? I suspect this ignorance about general knowledge would apply equally well to the classics of the English language. Agnes-Mary Brooke, a commentator on social and educational issues, reported on a small survey she conducted among students from different faculties at the universities of Otago and Canterbury.<sup>6</sup> It emerged that many students regretted that they had been taught so little of substance in English classes at school. They had had little or no exposure to what, according to Professor Karl Stead, should be the crown of English studies at school, that is:

... the encounter with literature, which offers the best, richest and most exciting examples of language use, the folk stories of our inherited European culture as well as the tales of our own settler and post-colonial experience – a fund of wisdom, a storehouse of fact, and a range of experience beyond the powers of any one person to live through in many lifetimes. The very best of poetry or fiction exposes readers, as often as they care to open a good book, to the influence of minds and sensibilities finer, more developed, richer, than they are likely to meet more than once or twice, if ever, in real life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Otago Daily Times*, 17 October 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dominion*, 28 July 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Education Forum, 1994, *English in the New Zealand Curriculum: A submission on the Draft*, Education Forum, Auckland, April. Professor Stead was the principal author.

A striking contrast to this view of English literature can be seen in the proposal for an English department course at Massey University on Feminist Readings of the Media<sup>8</sup>. Apparently Rachel Hunter, Marilyn Monroe and Elle Macpherson were to be the subject of lectures in a course called: The Female Star as a Semiotic Site. An explanatory paper said that the course "will use prevalent theories of textual production, interpretation and consumption to analyse the significance of female representation in textualities featuring women as well as in those produced and/or consumed by women." Students were to "study television sitcoms and drama, popular romance and film." I don't know whether the course went ahead, but it is amazing to me that it could even be contemplated by a publicly funded state university. It may cater for those brought up on a diet of Neighbours and Shortland Street but surely not for those who were nurtured on the more substantial fare of, say, Shakespeare and Milton.

But English and the humanities are not the only areas of concern – science and maths are others. A study of the mathematics ability of students entering the primary teachers training programme at the Auckland College of Education revealed the most alarming mathematical incompetence among those destined to teach our children.<sup>9</sup> Michael Matthews, then Professor of Science Education at Auckland University, reported that the tests were "pathetically simple" – being pitched at an upper-primary or lower-intermediate level of competence and that "in order to lessen supposed test anxiety and novelty effects, a version of the test was sent to all prospective students some weeks before the College test ... and students who wished to could bring relatives to sit with them during the test."<sup>10</sup>

The tests were indeed astonishingly easy. However, 19 percent of students could not measure the length of a pencil placed against a ruler with its end on the zero mark, and when the end was placed on the 2cm mark, this figure jumped to 27 percent. Thirteen percent could not work out the cost of an item with GST at 10 percent and when the test required reworking the calculation with GST at 12.5 percent the error rate jumped to a staggering 41 percent. Forty percent didn't know

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<sup>8</sup> Reported in the *New Zealand Herald*, 5 May 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Buzeika, A (1993), "A Study of Entry Levels and Progress in Mathematics of Primary Teacher Education Students at Auckland College of Education", thesis submitted in partial requirement for the Diploma of Mathematical Education at Auckland University.

how to work out the price per litre of petrol given that 4.15 litres cost \$3.69. I would stress that these results are of students who had gained entry to a teacher training college and who are, in many cases, now passing on mathematics to the next generation of New Zealand school children.

It might of course be argued that the students' mathematical ability improved very significantly during their time at training college. However, Matthews wasn't so sure. One student who scored low in the pre-entry maths test and yet scored a distinction at the end of her first year was asked to explain the disparity in her grades. She said:

The score [in the entry test] doesn't surprise me really – if I had been taught these things I would have been able to do them. I was doing the test on my own – there was no one there to ask questions of, to help me out, to explain the questions to me if I didn't understand what to do.

Professor Matthews noted that this student's comments "invite the thought that maybe the [college's] first year mathematics papers are easier than the entry test. If so, there is a complete trivialisation of tertiary education occurring in New Zealand." The results of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies of science and maths performance, reported in 1997, only confirm the concerns about our poor maths performance at primary level.<sup>11</sup> The studies tested more than half a million children in 26 countries. Our standard 2 and 3 children were found to be "well below" the average among participating countries in maths and slightly above average in science. Form 2 and 3 children were "mediocre at best" in maths and form 3 science students only slightly above the international median. The study said many New Zealand teachers had a poor grounding in maths and science and that the colleges' minimum requirements for studying the subjects and how to teach them were "worryingly low" – after Professor Matthews' comments this should have come as no surprise. It also said that New Zealand teachers might provide too much "fun" maths and science and not enough challenging activities, and suggested there was too much reliance on calculators.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthews, M (1995), *Challenging NZ Science Education*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, pp 57-64.

<sup>11</sup> The following comments are taken from the report by John Gerritsen in the *New Zealand Education Review*, 11 June 1997.

For me, the problems of New Zealand education, despite our habits of denial, were encapsulated in two statements by recent ministers of education. Wyatt Creech told a PPTA principals conference in 1996: "The fact is that New Zealand has a world class education system – other country's (*sic*) envy us". And, almost as if to underline the problems with literacy, Nick Smith proudly announced the results of the literacy taskforce earlier this year, emphasising that it was the work of a group "compromising (*sic*) mostly principals and teachers". To be fair, the problem may not be with the ministers; it is more likely to lie with the products of the education system that find their way into the bureaucracy and ministers' offices.

It would be nice to be able to say that these deficiencies have been fully acknowledged and that reforms enacted or in train will effectively deal with them. But I can't hold out this hope. In fact in some ways I think recent reforms will make matters worse.

Consider the curriculum reforms that have been progressively introduced since 1993 when the New Zealand Curriculum Framework was published. The main change was to specify curricula in terms of outcomes and not content. The government confirmed in a recent Green Paper that "there has been a shift to look directly at student outcomes: how well are students doing."<sup>12</sup> On the face of it, this sounds very sensible. Surely it means we could expect to see outcomes set in terms of what children actually know, which means that the content of what they should know, and the context in which they develop skills, must be specified? Surely we could expect the new Social Studies curriculum to address the appalling ignorance of general knowledge and the new curriculum for English to introduce much-needed precision and rigour into the teaching of English. Unfortunately, not so.

What we often find, if we browse through these new curricula, is mush. There is very little recognisable content. For example, here are some objectives from the new English curriculum in the strand for "expressive writing":

Level 1: write spontaneously to record personal experiences

- Level 3: write regularly and with ease to express personal responses to different experiences and to record observations and ideas
- Level 5: write regularly and confidently to respond to a range of experiences, ideas, observations, and texts, developing a personal voice
- Level 8: use expressive writing regularly, fluently, and by choice, to reflect on, interpret, and explore a wide range of experiences, ideas, feelings, and texts, expressing complex thoughts in a personal voice.

Several things occurred to me as I read through these objectives. First, they are full of adverbs like "regularly", "confidently", "fluently" and so on which are capable of a wide range of interpretation. How often does a child have to write in order to reach the "write regularly" requirement? How fluent is "fluent"? Yet we are also told that learning outcomes are to be so "clear" that students' achievement can be assessed against them.

Secondly, there is nothing at all about writing well – about good sentence structure, grammar, spelling and such like. When, for example, should a child learn about commas and semi-colons and apostrophes? How many words should a child know how to spell correctly at the various levels? We are not told.

Thirdly, progress through the levels depends on developing such things as regularity, confidence and fluency – not on increasing precision, accuracy and style. Elsewhere there are very general references to grammar, syntax, and the "conventions of written forms" but we are not told what they are or when they should be introduced into the classroom. All this is extremely disappointing. We cannot look to the new curriculum to remedy our national deficiency in the English language.

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<sup>12</sup> Creech, W and Donnelly, B (1998), *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools*, Ministry of Education, May, p 7.

Nor will it, of itself, do much to restore appreciation of our cultural inheritance. There is a vague reference to "texts of established critical reputations" (which could cover just about anything), but the main emphasis is not on literary merit but on the importance of children reading from a range of literature "balanced" in terms of local and overseas origin and ethnicity of author – again all very discouraging.

Last year the government established a taskforce to advise it on literacy at the primary level and how to achieve the literacy objective in its goal that "By 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write, and do maths for success." The taskforce reported in April and many of us looked to it to do something to redress the lack of rigour in the English curriculum. But it is a disappointing document. I would have expected the taskforce to establish the symptoms of poor literacy performance, investigate and identify the causes, evaluate the possible solutions, and then come up with conclusions and recommendations consistent with the analysis. But the report is full of banalities and ducks all the tough issues. According to a media comment, a key point in the report was that the "system doesn't need changing but tweaking or 'intensifying' in some areas".<sup>13</sup> It is the educational equivalent of saying that we can earthquake-proof a building by applying another coat of paint.

Another tentative, but possibly useful, initiative also seems likely to come to naught. In May last year the government put out a Green Paper on assessment in primary schools. It proposed a rather weak set of assessment methods in the hope, presumably, that this would lead to a marked improvement in children's learning. The most contentious proposal was that all primary children should take externally set and marked tests in English and maths at certain stages. However, the results were to be reported in an obscure way making it difficult to compare the results of individual schools; indeed the paper explicitly said that the government would not publish 'league tables'. Unfortunately, the new minister of education has endorsed the anti-league table stance of the Green Paper, and education officials and providers have raised questions about whether there will be external assessments at all.<sup>14</sup> We await government decisions, but the outlook is not promising for those who look for some clear, externally referenced tests in core subjects such as English

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<sup>13</sup> *New Zealand Education Review*, 16 April 1999.

and maths so that parents can know how well local schools and their own children are doing against national benchmarks. Interestingly, the responses from some 22,000 parents indicated that "they had a thirst for more information about how well their children are doing".<sup>15</sup> They are going to be disappointed.

I conclude that we have some serious deficiencies in our schooling systems that are now increasingly acknowledged. However, we are simply not searching for those causes of the problems which are capable of being addressed by the government and schools. They must involve the selection, training and employment of teachers, teaching methods, curriculum specification, assessment, and school governance and management. Instead we have been messing about at the margin – the tough but ultimately critical issues, such as how to get rid of poor teachers and attract and retain good ones, are off-limits. And it is the same with external assessment and anything else that might question or challenge the effectiveness of schools or the competence of teachers. The ministry will not contemplate any change to current curriculum reforms that, in my view, are set to make the situation worse. The results of the taskforce on literacy and the Green Paper on assessment seem unlikely to do other than give bureaucrats more work. It is, I regret, a gloomy outlook. Where should we be going?

The first point is that we need a new way of thinking about schooling – not simply tackling bits and pieces at the margin. The underlying assumption is still that the system is fine and more funds and additional tweaking are all that is required. We've been spending and tweaking for decades, yet the problems persist. Why? I suggest the basic problem is that we are trying to run a highly complex, geographically decentralised schooling system by central edict from Wellington. Inevitably the interest groups at the centre, in the education bureaucracies and the teacher unions, influence the outcomes of policy debates – indeed determine what is open for discussion. We now have a system that, under the Picot reforms, was meant to be highly decentralised and provide some parental choice of school, yet is increasingly regulated from Wellington. Parents have some voice on boards of trustees but no real powers – and virtually no powers of exit, that is, of removing

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<sup>14</sup> Nick Smith, 1999, "The Education Agenda – Priorities for '99", Rotorua, 22 March.

<sup>15</sup> Frances Kelly, a senior manager of the ministry of education, reported in the *Otago Daily Times* of 13 April 1999.

their children from a failing school, unless they are wealthy enough to fund additional transport costs and private school fees.

I suggest the government should focus on what it alone can effectively undertake. In the curriculum area this might be a core curriculum for the primary and lower secondary sectors. The government should ensure the provision of good information to parents about school performance and their own children's achievement relative to national norms, which at the primary level would require externally set and marked assessments in core areas such as English and maths. All schools – government and private – should be financed on a similar basis to allow parents choice of schooling for their children. State schools must be given the freedom to thrive and grow, and this must include freedom to contract with teaching staff subject only to general employment law. Equally, failing schools must be closed or taken over by successful ones. Schools must be allowed to innovate.

This is hardly a radical prescription. Consider, for instance, what is going on in Britain. As *The Economist* put it recently:

In response to [its] problems, Britain's education reforms have tried to be much tougher about discriminating between successful and failing schools. League tables of schools, based on exam results, are published every year. The government has begun to close failing schools and is encouraging private-sector managers to get involved. Within schools 'progressive' teaching methods are being discouraged, and there is more of a focus on basic literacy and numeracy. Mixed-ability teaching is being discouraged in favour of streaming by ability. Measurable progress is being made.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting that it is a Labour government that is pushing ahead with real reforms that must put it seriously at odds with its supporters in the teacher unions. We share many of Britain's problems, yet there is very little sign here, under a government with few political links to the unions, of the determination that Britain is showing in tackling them. And Britain's reforms, radical as they may already seem to many New Zealanders, will, I think, fail unless they are followed by further reforms such as attaching funds to pupils, not schools, thus giving successful schools the incentive and opportunity to expand. In New Zealand we have a long way to go, and the tragedy is that, although the need is staring us in the face, we

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<sup>16</sup> *The Economist*, 10 April 1999, p 18.

don't yet seem to be prepared to acknowledge the importance of making the journey.