

Professional Learning Proposal

During my Term 1, 2020 Principals' Sabbatical, at the start of a new decade and with over 3 decades of teaching and education leadership experience behind me and with one more decade of the like ahead of me, I wanted to:

1. Take stock of what I have learned from teaching in three different education systems, the UK, US and NZ systems, and within two different sectors, the primary and secondary systems;
2. Synthesize what I feel has been structurally successful and highlight those things that I feel are structural barriers to student achievement and an education system's success;
3. Make suggestions, in the belief that someone out there in a position of authority in the education system, might be interested enough to read this, consider that there are some benefits and wisdoms in the things I have written and, possibly, even action some of my suggestions not to satisfy the already withered ego of this public servant but because maybe, just maybe, some of the suggestions might actually be sensible and beneficial to children, caregivers, teachers and the Ministry of Education.

My main proposal focus was on teacher supply and the related issue of system 'fluidity'. At a time of serious and on-going teacher shortage and just after a long national teachers' strike, I wanted to try and examine what could be done to make the NZ system more fluid, integrated and attractive so that the supply of quality teachers into the system was more assured as we looked long term in relation to planning for system sustainability.

My proposal, quite naturally, also morphed into looking at aspects of the present system that are both barriers to system fluidity and, more broadly, system peculiarities that are barriers to the success of all those within the system.

The breadth of my research during the sabbatical

I will briefly outline what research my findings are based on whilst, at the outset, owning up to the honest fact that the significant findings have been generated over a long period of time and are reflections on many 'bits and pieces' of snatched conversations with other professionals and my own subsequent musings on what those conversations made me think and taught me. Specifically for this piece, though, I have also:

1. Visited 9 different countries within the last 5 years and conversed with professionals in all 9 about the issues I was thinking about and wanting their opinions on. The 9 countries were: our own New Zealand, the United Kingdom, The United States of America, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam.
2. Talked to, and sometimes formally interviewed, 65 experienced educators throughout those 5 years. The breakdown of this number is as follows:

[a] 47 educators who are working in New Zealand. Their original nationalities [and original teaching experiences] are: 25 New Zealanders; 10 from the UK; 2 from Australia, 1 from Ireland; 1 from South Africa; 2 from the US, 4 from Canada, 1 from Sweden and 1 from Fiji. Of these 47 teachers, 18 have spent the main part of their careers teaching in the primary, 28 in the secondary and 1 in the tertiary sectors. Of these 47 teachers, only 3 have taught in two sectors – the primary and secondary sectors, and none across all three sectors.

[b] 7 teachers who are still working or have previously worked in the UK system [3 in primary and 4 in secondary education];

- [c] 2 teachers who are or have worked in the US system [both in secondary education];
- [d] 2 teachers who have worked in the Australian secondary system;
- [e] 2 teachers who have worked in the Japanese secondary system;
- [f] 1 teacher who has taught in Singapore in secondary education;
- [g] 1 teacher who has taught in the Malaysian system in secondary education;
- [h] 2 teachers who have taught in Cambodia in primary education; *and*
- [i] 1 teacher who has taught in Vietnam, in secondary education.

General Findings from and reflections on my Professional Learning Inquiry and discussions with these educators

1. Most systems have clearly and distinctly separated primary, secondary and tertiary systems. Many people I have talked to felt this wasn't necessarily a strength of these systems and things could be done to integrate the systems more for the benefit of children and teachers and the system's ability to cope with teacher shortage;
2. Most of the systems are beginning to identify issues of teacher supply across all the sectors.
3. Some of the more obviously and recognisably successful school systems have more integrated achievement systems than the New Zealand system arguably does;
4. The majority of systems have more seamless and understandable assessment language than, arguably, New Zealand does.
5. Some of the apparently more successful systems do allow for teachers who have been trained in one system to teach in at least one of the other sectors. These systems see teachers as 'trained educationalists' who, yes, can have a specialism but who are also able to be 'utilised' where the system has a need; a few do not allow this and have clear extra training programmes that are expected before 'sector cross-over' can occur. Many systems seem to see teachers working across sectors as a strength not a weakness. Primary, secondary and tertiary educators sharing their expertise is often seen as very beneficial.
6. Most of the systems have a specific and identified programme to support teachers in their professional learning post-qualification and whilst they are 'on the job'.
7. A minority of systems have stretched this to look, in a very wide-ranging and creative way, at teacher 'refreshment' to endeavour to retain teachers within the education system and avoid 'burn-out' of teachers and teachers leaving the profession for other, negative reasons.
8. Some of the more obviously successful systems do not have their educational professionals under-valued in many of the ways that this seems to occur in NZ and some other 'first-world' countries. Many said that there was 'professional challenge' but that this was always done in a very respectful manner with a general attitude that the educators are the professionals and what they advise educationally should be given most weight when contemplating any given decision.
9. Many systems are beginning to be much more 'prescriptive' in terms of attendance at school than NZ is. Many teachers see the NZ rules around a child having to be at school as extremely loose and even laissez-faire. Many colleagues I talked to suggested that parent choice in relation to Home Schooling their child [children] was granted too often and was poorly monitored. Following an Official Information Act request made in September 2019, I found that in the Te Tai Tokerau region alone, 544 children were being home schooled. Now I am certainly not suggesting that all these situations are unjustifiable reasons and that there are not some very able and effective parents and/or caregivers supervising an effective Home Schooling experience for their children but the numbers are far too high, the checks are not rigid enough and there are also too many [some I know personally] who are getting a very, very poor educational provision and are both being let down by the system and are 'falling through the cracks'. The system support for changing poor school attendance is poor in NZ when compared to many of the other school systems. A desire to give parents choice has, in general terms, morphed into a sloppy and lazy low expectation on the quality of education provided to

children who are being home-schooled and a very weak system of tracking and chasing non-attendance or poor attendance. This has further developed into becoming a 'low-value' attitude in many to the importance of school attendance in NZ.

10. Many systems do not have the 'transience issues' that seem to affect the NZ system. Many felt that the NZ system has very poor transferring of information between schools;
11. Almost all felt that education needs to be 'de-politicised'. It is unhelpful that the NZ system is so dramatically affected every time the party in government changes. There needs to be a separation of politics from education as much as is possible. There needs to be long-term, developmental, incremental changes that allow the professionals within the system to 'tweak' it as new learning or new technologies become available. As a recent example, the wholesale, system-wide switch to and then from National Standards was an incredible waste of all sorts of educational resources but especially money and time. It creates dissatisfied and confused teachers and the biggest losers become the children who need teachers who are happy, fulfilled, knowledgeable, clear on the direction long-term and highly motivated because they know what they are doing, why they are doing it and they feel valued and successful.

Main suggestions coming out of my Professional Learning Focus

1. Our sectors need to be far more integrated and the barriers of transition broken down as much as is possible;
2. One of the most often mentioned issues relates to different assessment systems. Major suggestions related to this are:
 - a. The primary system must utilise assessment language that is much more positive, similar to the secondary system. It is baffling that the primary sector would use language such as 'Above', 'At', 'Below' and 'Well Below' the expected national standard when the secondary sector in NCEA would utilise "Excellence", 'Merit', 'Achieved' and 'Not Achieved' as well as adding in further references to success such as 'Distinction'. Certainly, 'Below' and 'Well Below' as well as 'Not Achieved' are considered ill-inspired and unhelpful.
 - b. As an added Primary-level confusion, there should not also be a 'new language' for each main subject reporting – having Reading ages, stanines, Maths stages, English levels etc. is bordering on the ridiculous. When you add in the reading colour wheel / PM Benchmark measures, e-AsTTLe assessment measures, and a hundred and one more acronyms and judgement methods, it has become an unwieldy and disjointed system that very many professional educators struggle with – so how we can expect parents and children to understand it is just beyond realistic. Let us be very honest – reports and reporting to parents has become a very confusing and, at times, scary process for educators, parents and children alike. We have heaped pressure on all these people and demanded that they all make sense of a massively complicated process of explaining something rather simple – where a child is at in their achievement in relation to their age.
 - c. There really needs to be a more common, shared and positive language to identify where any child is at on the achievement continuum from entering school to exiting formal education. Most people I talked to felt that achievement could be constructively reported from ages 5 to 18 as something similar to what NCEA offers. The most agreed to suggestions were: 'Achieved with Excellence', 'Achieved with Merit', 'Achieved' and either 'Progressing' or 'Developing'. There was also a suggestion that 'Achieved with Distinction' could be added in to indicate a form of giftedness in that subject area. There was a very broad, agreed consensus that such a system would create continuity, remove a lot of children's and parental confusion and generate more system integration and consistency.
 - d. Primary school testing has also added a further layer of assessment jargon and language confusion. There are many offenses and offenders but the worst of these is e-AsTTLe. Before we get to this, there needs to be comment made about all these very clever and very well-meaning

'assessment gurus'. Without meaning to, they have done great damage and someone needs to call them out. The scale scores, highly descriptive rubrics, bar and whisker graphs [I could go on – and on – and on] don't help. It is assessment gone mad and, I am sorry to say, having been given political credence, it has also helped some individuals to get wonderful, out-of-classroom salaries creating assessment resources, or advising governments or going on conference speaking tours. I became aware of the nonsense as it relates to e-AsTTLe when I first entered primary school education in NZ after time in secondary schools in 3 different countries [also including NZ]. When we first sat down to do an e-AsTTLe writing assessment 2 very experienced and very well-meaning educators began to have a serious debate about what the 3 important letters of B, P and A meant. One said they were Basic, Proficient and Advanced and the other said they were Beginning, Progressing and Achieved. Well, the debate rattled on but the overriding impression was confusion. Too many letters, too many assessment words, too little clarity. I won't tell you how the dialogue further deteriorated when we started assessing a child's piece of writing against all the various rubrics and then debating which scale was the correct and current one and which one wasn't. It is all so unhelpful but worse, professionally confusing and damaging. A simple 'Best-fit' list of what a child is expected to be able to do at their age is enough. Also, if teachers can get to know these 'Best-fit' lists there is no need for many, many one-off tests to prove where a child is 'At'. The evidence is in their books and their daily work. A teacher has the accumulated evidence. Teachers will know all they need to know as they see each child's work develop [or not] as the year[s] progress. So – far fewer tests please meaning much less teacher and teaching time lost. It is a sin how much time teachers have to be out of classrooms testing children. We want teachers in classrooms, teaching children. Value their teaching. Parents want teachers in classrooms, not in little rooms for many days a year conducting one-on-one tests telling them information that they probably already know from seeing the children and their work daily in the classrooms first hand.

- 3. The age-related primary school entry system in NZ is also confusing. This is not only creating issues at the entry point – when does a child start school? – but also at other important points in their schooling – Their age in June/July affects whether they are Year 6 or year 7 and whether they should go on to secondary school yet or not. Many educators I discussed this with felt that it needs clarifying and simplifying but also that there needs to be recognition of the vital importance of early childhood education. Many suggested that there should be free early childhood education from the age of 3 paid for by the state. This shouldn't be compulsory but should be attractive and easily available to all. In terms of brain development, all the theory points towards the importance of quality early brain stimulation to being behind long-term achievement and educational success. Then all 5 year old children should be characterised as Year 1 on starting primary education on 1 February each year, no matter what the physical age is. Everyone is clear. It is immaterial whether a child is 5 years and 1 day or 5 years and 364 days – they are all Year 1s on February 1st! There is no confusion and no difficult discussions then or later on.**
- 4. NZ needs to retain its teachers. To do this it must look at even more creative ways to allow for 'teacher refreshment'. What I am on now - a one-term Principals' Sabbatical - is very creditable and it has done me the power of good despite the outbreak of Coronavirus during it! I think this needs to be extended. I don't claim to know much about it but one of the best examples of such provision seems to be the Canadian leave system. Under this model, I believe, a Canadian teacher can, over a period of 7 years, pay a percentage of their salary from source into a separate account held at their equivalent of TeachNZ or Novopay, and then, after those years are up and the money has accumulated [with interest], the teacher can take a one-year paid sabbatical / study leave from their current position, returning to it one year afterwards. This would give all teachers something to look forward to and plan for. It would be wonderful refreshment and would allow our educators to grow professionally and personally. I heartily recommend it be something the NZ Education Service and Unions look at to stem the flow of exhausted, disaffected teachers leaving the profession.**
- 5. A contentious one I know but the system needs to have a much higher expectation on excellent attendance rates at school. The whole system and societal attitude needs to be shifted towards**

expecting attendance at school, even insisting on it for the sake of all children. There needs to be 'teeth' in the system. Parents must send their children to school and children must go. There must be a system of warnings and even fines to enforce this. We have to get serious with it. When Home-Schooling arrangements are granted, they must be the only option, they must be rare and they must be monitored properly. To be in a system where children are now demanding that parents home-school them when it gets a 'little tough or challenging' at school is, not to put too fine a point on it, ridiculous. For the parents and then the system to support this 'child-power' is a very dangerous step on a very slippery slope that the system might already be on [with the pace quickening towards a huge mess at the foot of that slope].

6. Teaching needs to be more obviously highly valued. The system – especially its politicised nature – has brought teachers into conflict with governments. The political parties need to recognise that they have been at fault for creating much of this conflict and it has helped no-one, especially not the children. The political parties need to accept that it is their arrogance in believing that they, as politicians, know better than the education experts what is best for children and what system is the most effective. It will take a brave politician [or brave political party] to stand up and say: 'back off education because we have damaged it and it is better run by the educationalists not we the politicians'. It will be a brave thing to do as, very unfortunately, everyone thinks they know best about how to teach and what the education system should do to improve achievement as everyone has attended school and almost everyone either has children in school or children who have been to school or has children who are going to attend school soon or who have close relatives with children in these situations. All of this doesn't make them wise about education. It is like saying that we can advise doctors about how to be better doctors because we have all been to a doctor's surgery. Most people wouldn't dream of challenging a doctor on their prognosis but more and more politicians, parents and even children are challenging teachers on how best to teach their classes. There needs to be a sea-change in attitude across society led by a brave politician or political party. If this doesn't happen, teachers will continue to feel under-valued and demotivated and abused and will continue to leave the profession in droves. This is not some nihilistic future world-view – it is a real and present danger.

Conclusion

In general, many well-meaning and often very knowledgeable, experienced and highly intelligent people – politicians, educators, theorists and the like – have contributed to creating a system that is highly complex and too confusing. No doubt, their little contribution was based on excellently researched material and was, in isolation, of worth. Unfortunately, it has contributed cumulatively to the growth of a system that has very, very many parts and very few seem to be connected well and contributing to an integrated system that is clear, understandable, helpful and progressive. My main message, therefore, is that the system needs dramatically simplifying with 'confusion' the number 1 enemy. It also, in much greater measure, needs to be left to the professional educators, in some structured and organised manner, to regulate and organise the system. There should only be a limited and general need for this system to report to the government of the day on how it is performing and what assistance it needs, financially and otherwise, from the government of the day.