

## Thresholds

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### ABSTRACT

I am more and more convinced that the process of education in our schools today must be concerned with enabling people to manage a variety of cultural, family, societal and work-related roles and that those roles require the ability to cross many thresholds. The crossing of thresholds, in another important sense, is inherent in invention and discovery - the ability to juxtapose ideas, information or concepts previously not connected to produce new knowledge. We have to move the concept of schooling from that of benevolent gift to the waiting population, to education which tackles with the most powerful means at its disposal - injustice, dislocation, disorientation, ignorance and dispossession. If we wish to educate our people to work and manage in some peace and co-operation then our subject matter must be the attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, actions and reactions of people in New Zealand, of whatever race, origin, creed or ability. I argue that the processes of the arts are the most powerful educational tools we possess to study that subject matter.

This paper is based on an address given at a conference on drama education organised by the New Zealand and Australian Drama in Education Association, in January 1989.

The conference was held at Auckland College of Education, which in 1988 commissioned Maori artist Robert Jahnke to construct a sculptural installation for the glassed foyer at the entrance to the main administration block. The work was commissioned as part of the college's Nga Kakano, a week in which all college programmes are focussed upon Maori culture, and issues in Maori education.

Te Pataka 'Matauranga' stands in the entry to this college. While visibly and literally a 'storehouse for education' this sculpture by Robert Jahnke deals at many levels of meaning and with complex symbolism with the concept of crossing thresholds - of moving from one place to another, from an outer world to an inner, from a place of challenge to a place of debate, from male to female, from physical to spiritual, from culture to culture.

I am more and more convinced that the process of education in our schools today must be concerned with enabling people to manage a variety of cultural, family, societal and work-related roles and that those roles require the ability to cross many thresholds.

The crossing of thresholds, in another important sense, is inherent in invention and discovery - the ability to juxtapose ideas, information or concepts previously not connected to produce new knowledge.

In selling Picot to the public government has made much of the increased autonomy schools will enjoy. Government, so to speak, is generously devolving power to the unit of operation - the school.

There is a nice logic to it. Let those who are most directly involved with or responsible for the learning of pupils at a particular school make the decisions about the management and provision of that learning. True, there are protests from teachers that their professional role and responsibility is threatened, but even they by and large appear seduced by the promise of local control of, perhaps, increased resources.

Teachers remain unexpectedly quiet, however, about the reinforcement of centralisation which is at the heart of *Tomorrow's Schools*. The Minister himself has made it plain he requires such centralisation of control 'to avoid the debacle of *Nga Tapuwae*', but it is the strengthening of curriculum control via the review and audit process which might have been expected to provoke more teacher reaction.

I can only suppose that this lack of reaction arises from New Zealand's particular history of centralisation of curriculum. The national curriculum is reinforced by the national examination system which promotes standardisation of subjects and prescriptions for that part of the school programme not already dictated by core requirements.

New Zealand teachers are sufficiently conditioned to structuring their programmes in terms of this centralised, national curriculum to accept it as the norm. The introduction of new forms of review and audit may appear as only a modification of existing inspection systems.

The question of whether any real autonomy is given by localising management of resources available to teach the national curriculum has not been much debated. This is the more surprising when it is now plain that 80 percent of schools charters will be dictated by Ministry of Education.

We need to place *Tomorrow's Schools* in the perspective of international educational trend. France, England, Wales, Canada, many of the United States of America, and Australia have moved or are moving towards centralised national curricula for the first time. This novel and politically aggressive policy put into a different focus accompanying moves towards decentralisation of school management. The issues of the shape and intent of national curricula under central government control and audit are of much greater concern to teachers in those countries than issues of local management to New Zealand teachers. One suspects that school-based management in England is not so much a benevolent enfranchisement of the schooling system as a deliberate reduction of the powers of local authorities! It would be naive to suppose that New Zealand government takes a more benevolent view of control of state education.

Let me make it clear that I am not declaring that centralisation is evil and -local autonomy good! Governments could, in terms of Peter Fraser's dictum, embrace a social policy which sought to provide all citizens of whatever race, creed or status with an education appropriate to their needs. Indeed, I suspect that many teachers and parents believe that to be the purpose of the state general and compulsory education system.

A scan of Hansard of the 1860's quickly reveals that far from benevolent and enlightened concern for the welfare of the people of the nation, general, compulsory education was introduced grudgingly by a government which saw it as an expensive but necessary means of improving an ailing economy by providing a more competent work-force. A reading of today's press reveals that in the eyes of the Round Table, and in the minds of many politicians the rationale has not changed.

Again, I am not setting out to debate that rationale. What interests and concerns me is that so many in the teaching profession do see schooling as a gift to children - a benevolent government providing for its people or a kindly teacher caring for the vulnerable child. This view is the more worrying when there is so much evidence that the schooling system is not, in fact, caring, benevolently or otherwise, for a substantial sector of the population, if caring can be interpreted as providing an effective orientation in life and work, and not merely caretaking!

There are substantial risks in the concept of schooling as a benevolent action by the state towards the citizen. There is the risk of dependency - of children, families or communities waiting

for and expecting the schooling handout. That dependency can promote the 'gratitude' condition - 'You the learner should be properly grateful for what we the state and the teachers are giving you. It is not for you to question our charity!'. Benevolence in this context becomes autocratic. The pupil who does not perform as directed, or questions what is given, becomes deviant - outside the norm - and is to be corrected, or passed on, or passed over. The fault does not lie with the schooling system.

A second risk is of over-protection. It has been said that the recent and radical social experiment of general, compulsory education has created 'school children' - a species isolated from daily living and events and removed from the structures of work and responsibility carried by family and community, young and old. This removal protects them from the extended consequences of what they do or do not do.

A third risk devolves from the first two. The unreality of a protective schooling system promotes shock when systems and worlds outside school are encountered. The 'school' child can develop marked disability in strategies required to manage in the out-of-school environment. This unreality may provoke anger, disillusion, a sense of betrayal - at the deceptions and omissions of the schooling system, which had declared it was looking after the child.

These are not, of course, possible risks. They are evident and common outcomes. Millions of dollars are being put into 'transition education' which I can only interpret as a desperate endeavour to patch up by short-term programmes the shortcomings of the 'normal' education system. Suddenly, it would seem, the school comes to recognise that substantial numbers of those about to leave are not ready to graduate. Suddenly 'new' kinds of learning are made available which for some reason not admitted were not available earlier in the school programme.

That this could be perceived as rational educational policy can only be believed if one accepts the irrationality of a system which measures compulsory education, not by knowledge required and acquired, but by hours per day, days per year, and years 'in total I am not advocating promotion solely on academic achievement. However, I do claim that pupils and parents need to know not only the order of achievement, but what may be impediments to progress within the system or from pupil or parents, and what alternatives are available and have been used. Consultation is a catch cry of *Tomorrow's School*. To be a reality it must provide information and generate responsibility from pupil and parent and from the school about their inputs into the learning contract.

That compulsion has been defined in terms of time spent at school is understandable given the difficulty of establishing any useful measures of mastery of the New Zealand curriculum which go beyond subject assessments. In over two decades of attempted curriculum reform the purposes of subject study remain the purposes of the curriculum. Subject study is valuable, but the aims and objectives of subject studies would appear logically to best be expressed in terms of the nature and purposes of subjects. The most recent curriculum review - report to the Minister (1987) repeats previous exercises. The reviewers conscious of educational need and serious in their concerns for the welfare of a polyglot society state high social principles, but fail to show how those principles can be attained in an operational format. One is left with an assumption that study of the prevailing battery of subjects may somehow satisfy those principles if teachers keep them in mind. Such an assumption is no more than pious hope, but there is a more serious risk that endeavours to rewrite subject purposes to match social principles will destroy the intrinsic quality of particular subject study.

Strengthening of the audit system without major overhaul of curriculum will further reinforce the hold of an entrenched centralised subject centred system. Centralisation may be further reinforced, rather than contested, by principals and teachers who fear that *Tomorrow's School* requirements for local consultation will reduce their professional freedom and authority. They may prefer central autocracy over a local debate. To surrender on those terms or for these reasons would be an abdication of professionalism. Professionalism is the best safeguard against centralised dominance and local self-interest.

Professionalism that the individual teacher, and the school as a professional unit, accept responsibility to take informed and skilled action to provide for the best and most appropriate learning of all of the pupils to whom they are responsible. It requires that they accept the responsibility to discover and deal with the consequences of those actions.

The professional teacher must assess the situation and needs of pupils within their communities, decide the best provision for them, provide the requisite conditions for learning, discover and evaluate outcomes, planned and unplanned, and respond appropriately. More than this, the professional teacher must accept a responsibility to seek advice and assistance when unable alone to meet and deal with pupils' needs.

It is this latter requirement that is most significant. It removes from the concept of professionalism, ideas of the teachers supremacy of knowledge, whether knowledge of subjects, knowledge of the cultures and societies within which the school is situated, or knowledge or teaching methodology. It makes paramount a responsibility to seek information and knowledge from the best sources available. It requires the teacher or the school to recognise that they are never self-sufficient.

Such an interpretation does not lessen the professional teachers need for knowledge. Indeed it emphasises the need for full and proper professional education of teachers. (It does remove silly concepts of teachers having to know everything about all subjects!).

Only professionally able teachers can build for a school a necessarily particular curriculum. Their professionalism will advise them that they will not have in themselves all the resources of knowledge necessary. But their professionalism gives them the responsibility to decide -and to live with and deal with the consequences.

General and compulsory schooling places an enormous burden on the professional teacher, one that has never been adequately realised or compensated for. Schooling historically whether in Maori or Pakeha society provided specialist training for specialised roles for a chosen sector of community or society. In these terms the task of curriculum design may be simpler, at least more clearly demarcated, since much more specific performance criteria can be established. Thus, the training of military, church, or ruler could concentrate upon development of skills in logic, debate, discourse, rhetoric, diplomacy, or leadership using a lingua franca of Latin, and employing as required a variety of sources and kinds of subject information to illustrate or exemplify.

Similarly, schools for masons or for gold smiths might have provided crafting skills, but these were a part only of a much more extended and secret curriculum, of trade practice, negotiation, contract and law, and protection of membership. Such schools and educations are exclusive; an important function is limitation of entry and control of membership for maintenance of power.

The purposes of general and compulsory schooling are by contrast inclusive, declaring that all must enter, that all knowledge must be available. It is not surprising that the general schooling system is bedeviled by opposing demands - to concentrate upon basic, essential learning on the one hand, and on the other to incorporate more and more subjects which will meet all pupils' needs!

It must be recognised that New Zealand tackled the issues of a curriculum for general schooling vigorously and seriously. In 1942 the Minister of Education, the Honourable H. G. R. Mason, appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Mr W. Thomas, to recommend upon the post-primary curriculum. The Thomas Report is a milestone of New Zealand educational development, and in its implementation, accomplished a great deal. It required a core of studies, remarkably liberal in their intent, which would provide the substance of 'a generous and well-balanced education'. This core which would in its time allocation occupy approximately half of a student's studies at third, fourth and fifth form, could be augmented by options decided by the individual school.

It might be said that the prevailing conservatism of the secondary schooling system pushed the options towards the academic studies of the English grammar school tradition, studies which favoured those few in pursuit of a university education.

The task of general, compulsory education has been further complicated by the devices used to establish it. Middle class managers required to provide this new, ubiquitous schooling looked as is customary to existing and respectable models and found them in grammar school systems. Those systems which provided efficiently for an upper class elite had to be severely distorted to meet the declared purposes of general education. If one takes away a well-defined and practicable purpose, to educate in control and leadership, and leaves only the vehicle, the vehicle is directionless, collides, or collapses.

The distortion or the mis-match is the more severe when the subject vehicles carry with them deeply ingrained characteristics of respectability, superiority, or necessity. Our current curriculum has not escaped hierarchic classifications: academic is superior to practical, professions are superior to trades, intellectual studies are more important and more difficult than practical.

These are cultural and class classifications. They are deeply embedded in schooling folklore and they make doubly difficult the task of defining purposes and structure in a curriculum for general, compulsory education.

The study of subjects enables one to know how they deal with information, ideas and concepts. Sciences, history or mathematics for example are human means of interpreting, representing and considering information.

To be able to use the particular capabilities of an historian, or scientist to deal with other dimensions of living and learning - the concept of transfer of training - is a remarkable skill. I suggested in my introduction that indeed that ability to 'transfer' may well be the process of invention or creation, both within or across subject fields.

This transference is the hoped for outcome of general education constructed on a subject curriculum base. It is, however, a capability which must be learned and practised, and is for most of us rarely automatic or easy.

It is the bridge, if it can be made to occur, between subject purpose and curriculum purpose, particularly when curriculum is expressed in terms of social principle. I argue that if the ideals and principles repeatedly stated in curriculum reviews are to be attained, then a 'bridging' action - an 'operational curriculum' must be developed.

- meet and deal with difference in informed, just and equitable ways – difference, for example, in cultural, ethnic, gender, class and personality terms;
- maintain productive relationships within family, community and work through knowledge about the exercise of personal and community responsibility, powers and authority;
- be productive - to make products, generate ideas, devise solutions, set up systems and organisations;
- obtain and use information - to shape it to personal and community use.

If people are to be able to do these and other things they will require information, skills and knowledge, a good deal of which may be supplied by existing school subjects, but some of which must come from other sources. We would need plural sociologies and histories, technologically and culturally diverse techniques of analysis, interpretation, imaging, metaphor, symbol formation and reading, focus, dramatisation, exposition, expression, advocacy.

The historic purposes of the arts were, I hold, powerful vehicles for these things, and it is within these domains that drama has a significant role in general schooling.

The arts have in diverse place and time:

- maintained the social fabric, communicating beliefs, values and orderings in clear and powerful terms;
- given form to connections and explanation of the distance between the haphazard events of day-to-day life, and a larger sense of purpose or direction to existence;
- allowed the testing within a - wider community of personal assessment or interpretation by providing shape, focus and form.

It is not a paradox to say that 'fiction' - novel, play, poem, painting, dance-gives us our most direct access to reality. Fiction is the territory of observing, analysing, considering and contrasting our inner and outer behaviours, our personal and community lives, our apprehensions of time and space. The devices of fiction allow us, particularly, to hypothesise, to project, to test and to react to our human condition - they allow us to give focus to 'what if?'

These processes of working out in focussed, powerful and dramatic form, consequences of our own and others actions, attitudes and behaviours have been central to the education of people in all societies.

It is a particular, and I believe dangerous characteristic of our time to have 'removed' the arts from daily education, sustaining as art only some hieratic conventions.

Maori fight desperately to sustain these processes of art as central to education in the face of a powerful colonising aesthetic which would relegate them to entertainment or anthropological curiosity. But that is a more intact and evident example of what western society, has done to itself, and done so effectively that the arts are now a decoration, a frill of curriculum.

If we wish to educate our people to work and manage in some peace and co-operation - and that would appear to me to be a reasonable and necessary purpose for general, compulsory education - then our subject matter must be the attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, actions and reactions of people in New Zealand, of whatever race, origin, creed or ability. I have argued that the processes of the arts are the most powerful educational tools we possess to study that subject matter. They are powerful because they are economic - they throw into sharp focus, put into dramatic view or contrast, abstract essential components or qualities, and compel attention and involvement. They are powerful, also, because within the culture of schooling as we know it, they remove protections. Much of our schooling does not touch upon the very behaviours, attitudes or beliefs about which we need an education.

It is difficult in art room, in drama, in writing, in dance to keep children from bringing into view what is happening to them outside the school. They paint or act out or write about how their parents behave, what they see people do, what they think is good or bad or valued, what happens to them - painful, strange, inexplicable, satisfying, exciting things.

I know that teachers of the arts meet the lives of their pupils in direct and inescapable terms. I also know that these teachers have the tools which can help children to look on at their own and others lives, and to consider, to contrast, to evaluate.

It is not sufficient, indeed it is almost indecent, to make polite requests for a better place for the arts in the curriculum of schools which are expected to provide general, compulsory education.

We have to move the concept of schooling from that of benevolent gift to the waiting population, to education which tackles with the most powerful means at its disposal injustice, dislocation, disorientation, ignorance and dispossession.

That is the way towards a productive, economically stable society.

## Reading list

- The Post-Primary School Curriculum (Report of the Committee appointed by the Minister of Education in November 1942; NZ Education Department, 1959).
- State Secondary Schools In New Zealand: A Baseline Survey (NZ Education Department, 1981).
- Art in schools: The New Zealand experience (NZ Education Department, 1978).
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- The arts in schools: Principles, practice and provision (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London, 1982)
- R. W. Witkin – The intelligence of feeling (Heinemann Education, London, 1974).