

What is happening right now in our primary and intermediate schools?

~ a perspective on the current situation.

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Do you believe in magic? I do, unashamedly. You can walk into many classrooms in the 400 schools in our association and witness sheer magic. This magic is the creation of many skilful teachers and learning support staff, led by committed principals. There is a collective passion about learning. It is tangible and exciting.

In our schools we have a strong "can do" belief. We believe that all children can learn and we are not in the game of blaming a child's background if they are struggling to learn at school. We acknowledge our absolute duty to teach them very well and to treat them with the respect that they deserve as learners. We strive on a daily basis to maximise every minute of precious learning time in our schools.

Having said that, for many teachers, their daily professional lives are hugely challenging as they are overwhelmed at times by the increasing diversity in almost all Auckland classrooms.

In these classrooms across the wider Auckland area, you will see children from many different countries whose home language is not English. Throughout NZ, the Ministry of Education funds English language learning for around 33,000 students. Only 3,000 are in the south island while around 23,000 are in primary and intermediate schools in our region. Many of these students end up being completely bilingual, speaking English and their home language fluently. They are truly talented and most learn English very quickly. This is demanding, yet ultimately very rewarding work for teachers, but not without its challenges.

In these classrooms you will also see children who are struggling in their learning and receiving support from dedicated learning assistants. In the same classes there are many extremely capable students who are achieving way above national norms in all learning areas. These students are working at very high levels, accessing information electronically, interpreting and synthesising it and using it to personalise their own learning. It is magical to see. Many of these students will be NZ's future leaders and they are in all our schools.

You may also see some students who are having problems settling to learn and who do not have the social skills to get along with others. Occasionally, there are students whose behaviour is absolutely dreadful and at times we struggle to access support for them. There are also numbers of students with a range of neurological disabilities, varying degrees of autism and attention deficit disorders enrolling in our schools. Many teachers work magic with these children, also.

Given all these challenges, however, our schools in recent times have generally been in pretty good heart. Over the last 2 years we have been getting ready to implement in 2010 a new curriculum, the NZC, that we believe will better meet the needs of the students in our increasingly diverse Auckland schools as outlined above. The priorities in the NZC will include a continued focus on reading, writing and mathematics, but there are some exciting future focused components as well. Inherent in the NZC is an explicit focus on teaching children the skills of learning how to learn as they navigate their way in an increasingly technological and connected world. Another exciting aspect is a focus on the development of their natural curiosity, thinking skills and creativity.

During 2009 however, on top of preparing to implement a new curriculum, we have been asked to integrate the government's national standards in reading, writing and mathematics in years 1-8. These standards or reference points, are in addition to literacy and numeracy progressions that we already use in our schools. There was a "consultation" period of around 5 weeks to consider 3 draft standards. We have yet to see the rest of them, and we had very little time to consult with our communities, let alone with our teachers who will be asked to use them in 4 months' time.

On the one hand we have been working towards a new competency focused curriculum developed in partnership with our communities and tailored to the needs of students, yet on the other we are being required to introduce government-directed standards. These standards are very likely to be far too simple for some students and far too difficult for others. This is the key issue with any standards and herein lies a paradox.

The proposed standards presuppose that all students can achieve at the same level at the same time during each year of their schooling. Educators and parents know that this is not the case. There is a very wide range of student capability from the beginning of year 1 and it is not possible to achieve the same outcomes for all students at the same time. There are important questions currently being raised by world leading NZ researchers and others involved in supporting education about the usefulness of prescribed standards in raising student achievement.

Many are suggesting that the government's priority needs to be on students who are underachieving, many of whom live in poverty. Indeed, it would be eminently sensible and highly desirable if we could invest in more learning support and other related professional support in the early years of schooling as we know that the critical period in a child's development is between 3 and 8 years of age. We know that we need to catch them early. They do this in Finland and Singapore and these countries lead the world in educational achievement.

The NZC provides a very positive framework for preparing children for their futures. In our schools we will continue to assess their progress in relation to the levels of the curriculum using formative assessment tools to work out the important next steps in their learning. We will continue to track and monitor the progress of each student, to put in place extra support where needed and to challenge and extend those who are gifted and talented. Each student is different, they have different talents and capabilities and they learn at different rates and in different ways.

It will be the magic of teachers, teaching our increasingly diverse students skilfully and creatively with warmth, very high expectations and passion that will continue to make the real difference, not a set of standards.