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Strengthening the System: Networked Education

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Abstract

Technology, and in particular the internet, has had an undeniable impact on all aspects of society. Professor Manuel Castells, conceptualises this change as the [rise of a 'Network Society'](#) with the internet being the decisive technology in this change - "with the explosion of wireless communication in the early twenty-first century, we can say that humankind is now almost entirely connected". The network society is constructed around personal and organisational networks, powered by digital networks and communicated by the internet. This, in turn, means society is both boundaryless and global.

If this is the emerging paradigm, then we need to reconsider how we 'do' education. Our current approach does not yet align with this. In fact, it only amplifies our vulnerabilities. Schools operating as silos, in a competitive, market-driven environment, focused entirely on the local context, makes little sense. It is no wonder that as schools compete to attract all the best teachers for their particular area, others suffer as a result. Teacher shortages are inevitable in such an environment.

Networks of schools and networked learning are just one key to addressing many of the challenges we face in a fast-changing world. This is clear in the development of Kōhui Akos which recognises the importance of schools working together to provide meaningful pathways for learners within or across local communities. However, networked and flexible education needs to be deeply embedded at a system level to really achieve meaningful change.

In such a paradigm shift, schools work together as networks of learning to create efficiencies in the use of their resourcing, to cater to a wide variety of learner needs and interests and to prepare them for a 'connected' world. We embed a system level solution. This solution has operated within New Zealand for close to thirty years with little central support. It is a grass roots development led by rural schools who had to work together to remain sustainable. Operating as regional clusters schools used the internet to share teachers and programmes across schools.

We certainly recognise the challenges to this. Self-managing, autonomous schools is embedded into our educational psyche. It is how we expect things to work. However, networked education actually strengthens the local rather than dissipating it. It does not deny autonomy. It just asks schools to think at both a networked and local level.

We have an opportunity to leverage technology to realise a vision for education in New Zealand which establishes schools as networks, as collaborators and as providers in a boundaryless environment. The significance of this vision is that is based on an established, proven model that has been in place in some form since 1994.

Join me as we explore the possibilities and opportunities with such a paradigm shift. What does this look like in practice? What are the challenges? What needs to happen to embed networked education at local, regional and system level?