# What is Happening to Schools and Teachers in New Zealand?

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Judged by recent media coverage, schools and teachers in New Zealand are copping a fair lashing. According to just a few of these newspaper headlines:

- Parents want an end to 'chaos' in class (Dye, NZ Herald 31/5/04)
- Students must behave: principal (Dye, NZ Herald 1/6/04)
- Discipline essential to education (Editorial, NZ Herald 2/6/04)
- Inspectors slam coast schooling (Devereux, NZ Herald 4/6/04).

The issues that have sent the media into its current feeding frenzy are the same hoary old ones that have been capturing media attention worldwide for as long as I can remember:

- school discipline
- the need for harsher punishment – in this instance, suspensions and 'stand downs'
- poor performing schools that need to be brought to account.

It is an intriguing question as to why this occurs with such uninterrupted regularity around the world and why, as intelligent communities with children in schools, we continue to tolerate such impoverished interpretations. Perhaps there is an explanation. When the media does one of it school and teacher bashing numbers what it does is feed into a deep community insecurity that has been labelled 'moral panic'; in short, the view that youth is out of control and that schools as institutions are complicit in this. During periods of extensive and rapid social change we often resort to explanations that emanate from seeming threats or fears that appear to have little resemblance to actual reality, and that effectively amount to a gross exaggeration in terms of an appropriate social response.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) cite the Scottish poet, journalist and songwriter Charles Mackay, who published a book in 1841 entitled *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions* in which he described such phenomena as:

> *…The Crusades, prophecies, astrology, fortune-telling, the witch mania of Renaissance Europe, belief in haunted houses, popular*

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*admiration for thieves and bandits, political and religious control of hair and beard styles, and 'tulipomania', or the economic craze that gripped the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, which entailed buying and selling tulip bulbs at incredibly high and, supposedly, inflated prices. Mackay argued that nations, "like individuals, have their whims and their peculiarities, their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do". Whole communities, he asserted, "suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and then go mad in its pursuit; millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, until their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first". (p.2)*

My point is rather a straightforward one; when societies lose sight of the essence of social institutions we can end up in some very peculiar places, and we are doing that to varying degrees in what we are allowing to pass as legitimate policies and practices in schools, and what it is we are requiring schools to do.

Lost in much of the manipulative image and impression management currently required of schools in doing the work of the economy, is a deep and abiding concern about schools as relationship-building institutions. If we are confused about the relational essence of what schools exist for, then it follows that what becomes displaced, degraded, corrupted and corroded is their relational project of 'becoming somebody' (Wexler, 1992). In other words, when teachers' energies are diverted into unproductively producing evidence with which to pit one school against another in a competitive rush for market share, where schools are ranked and rated against each other in league tables of academic achievement and school stand-downs and suspensions, regardless of the differential cultural capital students bring with them, then young people receive conflicting and confusing messages about what it is they are expected to be learning in school. The kind of synthetic economistic and management discourses we have allowed to infiltrate schools are starting to reveal extremely worrying damaging effects.

If we want the evidence that the current policy trajectory is not working, then it is not hard to find. Pope (2001) has labelled the synthetic and superficial processes of many schools as having the effect of students 'doing school' – that is to say, what occurs when students tolerate school, rather than actually engaging with it as a project of intellectual curiosity. According to Pope, what students learn when they "do school" is that they learn how to "compromise their values and manipulate the system by scheming, lying and cheating". In this instance, schools are "fostering anxiety, deception, and hostility" as students get caught up in "grade traps" that "pin future successes to high grades and test scores" (fly-leaf of the book).

Lost and damaged in the project of implicitly blaming schools, teachers and students and requiring them to be held to account in demeaning ways for superficial achievement-related performance indicators that are a paltry surrogate for curiosity-driven learning, is the overall demeanour and bearing in the way we think about, approach and treat the young. Nichols and Good

(2004) argue that in respect of America it is certainly a case of a 'nation at risk' but not for the reasons of poor academic performance usually presented. What we have instead, they argue, is a set of official educational policies that are deeply distrustful of the young – for example, the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation. These approaches display a poor understanding of youth, a 'careless indifference' towards them, and an 'inadequate interest' in policies that are genuinely concerned with the adequate socialisation of youth. These comments apply equally to societies like New Zealand that have a recent history of treating teachers in distrustful ways and that are only coming to the belated realisation that teaching is valued work that deserves support, recognition and celebration. Nichols and Good (2004) put it succinctly when they said:

> *Youth deserve to be viewed as an investment. The first step in providing better socialization opportunities for all youth is recognizing that youth are much better than they are commonly depicted, and that they rise to multiple pressures in a complex modern world and succeed in many, unrecognized ways. Let's celebrate and help youth—not minimize and ignore them. Second, it is important for educators to insist that the media be more accurate in their depiction of youth and to stop using monolithic descriptions of them such as irresponsible, lazy, and dangerous. Youth need to be known by their actions not mythical accounting.*

So, what does this mean and where do we move from here? Again, to invoke Nichols and Good (2004): "Society and its leaders must take a more aggressive stance to protect and guide youth as opposed to minimizing and devaluing them". The implications are fairly stark as are the consequences of not acting to change the current direction.

What we need to stop doing is:

- unnecessarily bearing down upon and blaming kids for failure
- disparaging schools by slamming them for alleged under-performance
- incessant school and teacher bashing which ends up only damaging schools and teachers
- demanding schools do the impossible in difficult circumstances
- treating schools in disrespectful ways, particularly in terms of the low trust forms of accountability foisted upon them.

What we need to start doing, or do more of, is:

- valuing and publicly proclaiming the good work schools do
- acknowledging the complexity of schooling and teaching
- celebrating the successes of schools
- giving praise where teachers go the extra mile with students
- as a community taking the line of continually talking up the value of what schools do for all of us!!

One way of systematically attending to the kind of mis-information of the kind I have raised in this paper, is through the creation of publications like this one.  As a profession in a supposedly informed democracy, we need a more sophisticated way of understanding and interpreting what it is that teachers do, what it means to be a teacher, how they undertake the complex task of helping to shape young lives, and above all, to celebrate what ought to be a vibrant part of our cultural landscape.

I congratulate the convenors of this journal in taking the initiative they have in moving to fill this most important space in the educational literature, and hope that their efforts shift the debate in urgent and much needed directions – particularly in terms of returning to what is most important about schools.

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