



EDITORIAL - Personalising Teacher Responsibility

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For the last ten years, the Ministry of Education has worked tirelessly to focus educational debate sharply on measurable benchmark standards of student achievement, and teachers' role in the continuous improvement of these.

To this end, we have a National Assessment Strategy that encourages New Zealand teachers to view assessment as the main tool in their pedagogical armoury, regional School Support Services that are now contracted to support and report on teachers through the conduit of aggregate achievement data, and an Education Review Office that 'assists' schools and centres to better 'assess' for accountability purposes. Since 1999, the Labour government has overseen the introduction of revised NAGs and NEGS that target specific groups of students 'at risk' of underachievement, and introduced the Education Standards Act 2001 that imposes balance sheet assessment, reporting and accountability procedures on teachers.

Alongside this grinding assessment ideology, 'Best Evidence' of a particular kind has been synthesised to persuade teachers that their attitudes and practices in the classroom make more difference to diverse student outcomes than do family background, the culture or leadership of the institution and how much money the government puts into education.

Responsible professional teachers on this argument are those who have appropriate government endorsed attitudes and commitment to promote higher standards of achievement by somehow personalising learning to the cultural, cognitive and affective needs of each student; lower achievement by students therefore is attributable only to the shortcomings of the teacher who has failed to take responsibility to understand the diversity that exists among students, how to use assessment to provide for appropriately engaging learning opportunities and to ensure all students learn.

This is a perverse and flawed argument for it deliberately shifts the locus of blame from the socio-economic domain of policy (government should provide enough Vote Education money through progressive general taxation to overcome structural disadvantages in family resources) to the socio-cultural domain of practice (disparities in achievement are 'caused' by teachers' inability or unwillingness to cater for diverse learning needs in the heterogeneous classroom).

The truth, as always, lies somewhere in between. On the one hand, government has modestly reduced absolute poverty levels by reintroducing social rents in state housing and increasing some social benefit payments. On the other hand, it has failed to significantly increase operational funding to

support teaching in classrooms and centres. Indeed, it has silently acquiesced from the sidelines as schools, centres and families attempt to stem the creeping privatisation of our free national education system through increased 'fees' [sic].

Similarly, there is evidence that teachers do need to develop better content and pedagogical content knowledge. However, they also need more time and space away from the assessment and record-keeping production line to properly explore and discuss the effects of novel teaching approaches on their practice in the company of equally reflexive colleagues; together with pre-service and in-service education programmes that encourage the knowledge, skills and critical dispositions necessary to undertake this conceptually and emotionally challenging labour.

At present, teachers are being required to assess more, to benchmark achievement more and to be prepared to shoulder the blame when their students do not achieve. Of course, it would not have to be like this if only the Ministry of Education would for their part take greater responsibility to ensure the conditions in which teachers have sufficient time and resources to engage in meaningful transformative learning about how to make education work for children and young people – a case of: trust more in teachers' moral commitment to learners, require them to assess less and ensure that the government of the day accepts the need to commit itself to adequately funding long-term education policy solutions.