



Book Review: Peachey, A. (2005). *What's Up With Our Schools? A New Zealand Principal Speaks Out*. Auckland: Random House. (ISBN 1 86941 698 (pbk) 214 pages, RRP\$27.95)

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RICHARD SMITH
AUT University

Here is a gem (well diamond in the rough actually) by a minor Kiwi educational 'celebrity'. Allan Peachey describes himself as a 'pretty ordinary bloke with some not so ordinary ideas about the New Zealand schooling system' (Peachey, 2005, Preface). Furthermore, true to form Peachey claims:

Some of the things I have learned might have relevance beyond education. I hope so. I am frequently described as outspoken, and sometime blunt – a reputation this book will confirm. I welcome that. I think New Zealanders have been encouraged to be too politically correct and too timid to speak up when something must be said. Say what you like about me: I have learned to run a school so that the teachers teach, the students learn and nothing gets in the way. This is a story of how it can be done.

(Peachey, 2005, Preface)

Well, as an educational sociologist, academic educator and someone with a reasonable background in educational leadership (and someone incredibly politically correct, a badge I wear with honour), I have a little to say about this arrogant posturing in the Preface. The author sets himself up as both the 'expert' and 'saviour' of Aotearoa/New Zealand education in the last sentence, that is, this is how I did it now follow my blueprint. We are now in the 21st century Allan, not many enlightened principals lead their organisation like military operations. I do, however, agree with your reputation as being both blunt and outspoken.

To contextualise this review, I believe there needs to be some background information on the author. Firstly, as a former principal of a large secondary school, he was often called upon by the 'educational' media (e.g., *Metro* and *North and South*) to make 'expert' commentary when they were writing articles defaming schools and teachers, and in particular, educational teacher 'training' organisations. He was also a member of Vision Schools (the former bulk-funded schools association).

With the above as a context – let the review proceed. Last year, when briefly reviewing this book for the New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society's (NZEALS) newsletter *Leading Lights*, I noted:

It is an election year and one potentially new National Party politician post-election may be the high profile, controversial and opinionated Allan Peachey, currently the principal of Aotearoa/New Zealand's largest secondary school (Rangitoto College). Coming from both a different era and political persuasion it might be easy to dismiss this book as the 'rantings' of a disaffected educationalist with populist right-wing inspired political and social beliefs and a change agenda. Peachey's political targets are what he considers the evils of bureaucracy and his targets are the NZQA for the NCEA and the ERO and the Ministry of Education. Whilst I may not necessarily agree with much of the contents of this book it does make rather interesting reading.

(Smith, 2005: 3)

Unfortunately, I never did get around to writing a more fulsome review of this publication for the *NZJEL*, or any other journal for that matter and I am hoping to rectify this here. The back cover of Peachey's book is illuminating, and probably good for sales; the following is stated:

What's Up With Our Schools? That's the most asked question from all who are perplexed or puzzled about the state of education in New Zealand. The principal of the nation's biggest school is well qualified to answer. With 3000 students at Rangitoto College on Auckland's North Shore, Allan Peachey has a roll that rivals the populations of small towns – and a wealth of lessons learned during a lifetime of education.

In *What's Up With Our Schools?* Allan examines NCEA, teacher quality, the Education Review Office, parents' influence, the drug culture, and much more. He challenges the mediocrity, bureaucracy, political correctness and failure of nerve that cause our education system to fail today's youth. In their place he offers a national strategy to make every school an outstanding one, so that every child can learn.

Allan's insights and outlooks are unashamedly controversial. Interspersed with his experiences – in city and country classrooms, coaching sport, developing in-house training, studying overseas and heading the Secondary Principals' Association of New Zealand – they are also inspiring and unforgettable.

One wonders if the author wrote this himself as it is such good (self) publicity. Assumptions aside, these paragraphs are invigorating stuff – and are big assertions to maintain and deliver upon. To his credit, Peachey writes in a no-nonsense, rather journalistic style, which is understandable and engaging – at least for the mass of perhaps uninformed readers (read educational 'consumers') that it is undoubtedly aimed at as the target audience.

This review is mixed – I agree with some claims and positions (terrible as it sounds as a critical educational academic, however, I believe in informed debate and the integrity of academic freedom as both an ideal and one realised

in practice). That said, there is extensive unsupported contention rather than continual argument or critique and a lot of the 'data' appear too slick, under-analysed and the substance of newspaper editorials rather than serious critical examinations.

What I liked about this book was the range of topic areas that Peachey decided to attack. It adopted a forth-right, no nonsense approach – although some of the arguments were not as well informed as I would have liked, they seemed to be more polemic, than fact.

The book consists of a preface (already outlined) and 18 short chapters of around 10-22 pages. The contributions are concise and for the most part free of educational jargon which is somewhat understandable given the audience is aimed at the wider public, not educationalists and the academic community. Each of the chapters has a diverse theme, or object of derision. Some of the more interesting titles for me were: 'Conspicuously politically incorrect' (Chapter 5) – an attack on political correctness; 'Who's afraid of the ERO?' (Chapter 9); 'Is NCEA the way of the future?' (Chapter 12); and, 'But for the schoolteachers ... There would be no sport' (Chapter 15). Chapter eight is a broadside at the Ministry of Education (MoE), trumped only by the next chapter which pillories the ERO. In critiquing the MoE Peachy notes:

In my plans for New Zealand education, the Ministry of Education cannot survive in its present form. The junkmen will no longer be allowed to use taxpayers' money to leave their junk in our schools. The blob will be squashed and buried.

(p.105)

His criticism of the ERO are far more stinging and personal. Those readers familiar with my research in New Zealand will know that I wrote my PhD thesis on the efficacy of the ERO from 1989-1999/2000. Like Peachy, I too was rather critical of the ERO, and its approaches to review (see Smith, 2002).

It is hard as an academic educationalist to take this book too seriously. Whilst I admire Mr Peachey's rapid rise in the teaching profession (and in politics), much (actually the vast majority) of the opinions offered was merely speculation and a somewhat one-sided view. The tone of the book was a little superior, as in / know lots (and have vast experience), and the bureaucrats know nothing, and neither do those 'sheltered' in ivory towers.

Whilst recognising that the book is there to add to, and stimulate the wider educational debates and is therefore written in a rather provocative style, I am concerned that some parents (and the community) reading it will think New Zealand's education system is either at best mediocre, or at worst, in crisis. Being an exaggerated, one-sided presentation of the 'state of the nation in education', and perhaps revealing my own biases now, I for one would be very concerned for schools and the whole education system if Mr Peachy became Minister of Education at the next election in 2008 (although I note that Bill English is still the National Party's Education Spokesperson).

These criticisms aside, it is a clear and readable book which I suspect will probably sell very well – at least for its intended audience. However, for those of us with a little more theoretical, if not 'practice' knowledge of education it remains a polemical piece which reads more like a right-wing educational manifesto than a thoughtful, reflective addition to the educational debate.

REFERENCES

- Smith, R. (2002). *Accountability in education: Reviewing the reviewers: A policy study of the Education Review Office*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Christchurch: University of Canterbury.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Te Kura Mātauranga at AUT University. He is the Book Reviews Editor for *New Zealand Journal of Educational Leadership* and also the Editor of *Leading Lights*. He is also on a number of national and international editorial boards. Richard has written book reviews for a number of Aotearoa/New Zealand publications – and

considers this to be a valuable contribution to scholarship and service to education's wide communities of practice.

Dr Richard J. M. Smith
School of Education Te Kura Mātauranga
AUT University
Private Bag 92006
Auckland 1020
richard.smith@aut.ac.nz