



## EDITORIAL – ‘Damned to mediocrity’: Political Targets, Bureaucratic Intent, Classroom Performativity and the Child as Cipher

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We read a lot these days about the anticipated economic benefits that result from increased national aggregate schooling outcomes. We read very little about the likely personal and social costs of ‘delivering’ them.

On 15 March 2012 in his widely reported *Better Public Services* speech to the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, the Prime Minister Rt. Hon John Key stated that in future the state sector would have a ‘results driven focus’ (Key, 2012). Government would report outcomes, not outputs, and concentrate on ten ‘challenging targets’ for the public service as a whole over the next three to five years. In compulsory schooling the sole target Mr Key announced was to ensure that a higher proportion of 18 year old students gain NCEA Level 2 or equivalent. He said that the Minister of Education, Hon. Hekia Parata, had set the requisite proportion at 85 percent compared to the current 68 percent, so as the Prime Minister observed, ‘achieving the target will be very tough’.

The Ministry of Education’s updated *Statement of Intent 2012-2017* of May 2012 includes a ‘strategic diagram’ that summarises how the Government’s progress toward the twin goals of ‘better public services’ and ‘stronger economic growth’ will be measured in education. The diagram articulates three schooling *targets*: to ‘increase the proportion of learners achieving expected literacy and numeracy targets’; that ‘80% of schools will be demonstrating highly inclusive practice for learners with special education needs, with 20% demonstrating good practice’; and, to ‘increase the proportion of 18 year olds with NCEA Level 2 or an equivalent qualification’. Four education sector *outcomes* are specified: ‘education provision of increasing quality and value to all’; ‘education success for every learner’; ‘maximising the contribution of education to the New Zealand economy’; and, ‘higher returns on investment’. Underpinning all four is ‘improving outcomes for priority groups (Māori, Pasifika learners, learners with special education needs and learners from low socio-economic backgrounds)’. The Ministry’s two stated *priorities* are improving outcomes for these groups of students, and maximising the contribution of education to the economy. To do this, the Ministry shall be ‘capable, efficient and responsive to achieve education priorities and deliver core business functions’ (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 12).

On 15 June 2012, amid much less media interest, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) launched the third edition of *In the Early World* by Elwyn Richardson (1925 - ) in the Elwyn Richardson Community Hall at Lincoln Heights School in West Auckland, where Richardson had been

principal for eighteen years until his retirement from teaching in 1987. *In the Early World* charts the practical development of Richardson's educational philosophy during the years he spent in his first teaching appointment as sole-charge principal at Oruaiti School in the Far North, from 1949 to 1962. In his own words, 'this book is about my attempts to understand children, especially their ability and desire to express themselves in their own natural ways. My attempts began with crafts, and these drew my attention to the individual idiom of each child in art, in music, in movement, in drama, and ultimately in language' (Richardson, 1964/2012, p. xix). The foreword to the first edition published in 1964 was written by John Melsner of NZCER who described the main classroom at Oruaiti as follows.

To go into this room, even without the children, was to be dazzled by a riot of colours, shapes and textures. Drums, pots, mobiles dangling from the ceiling, masks, painting, printing gear, a small electric kiln – all the disorder of a dozen simultaneous workshops was pent up in this small room. But there was a discernible pattern, or perhaps a series of patterns, the kind of pattern which children can feel at home in, where the organization is sometimes the minimal necessary for efficient working and sometimes the exaggerated arranging lavished on a sacred object or a sacred process. It was a room of shrines cohabiting with the muddle which is incidental to utter absorption in a task, a room through long experience immediately submissive to every change of mood imposed upon it by its masters. (Melsner, 1964/2012, p. xiii)

As Gwenneth Phillips remarks in her celebratory new foreword to the 2012 edition, Richardson was one of a group of creative 'teacher-pioneers' who 'changed the course of education in New Zealand and across the world ... They rejected the practices of their day that marginalised the child, thus laying the foundations for a child-centred approach, unique to New Zealand' (Phillips, 2012, p. v). She goes on to explain that, 'this child-centred approach was rooted in the belief that children, while engaged in the activities of a community, create their own identities and language, through the boot-strapping effect of their own successes. Feeling and intellect, living and learning were inseparably intertwined' (p. v). Central to a child-centred education is the realisation that children's own lives, experiences, relationships and interests constitute the necessary basis of curriculum, that children can and should learn to be the best judges of their 'education success', and that schooling is properly about the communal processes involved in acquiring the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary to critically interact with the natural and social worlds.

Official 'targets', 'outcomes' and 'priorities' have very little to do with a genuinely child-centred education. The child at the centre of this 'outcomes' view of education is a cipher or avatar, not a person, while the performative teacher is required to view pedagogy as the science of continuously improving student outcomes and is employed merely to ensure the Ministry can efficiently deliver its core business functions. The interests being served by this sterile vision of learning are governments, not those of children, families and communities. Although the Government's goal of reducing structural

educational inequalities is one with which it is impossible to disagree, the technocratic ‘deliverology 101’ (Barber with Moffitt & Kihn, 2011) or the means of targets, timeframe and plan are likely to lead only to greater mediocrity of learning. The insight and contribution of Richardson and fellow teacher-pioneers in the mid-twentieth century was to recognise that children are persons, not ciphers. In the same child-centred tradition, we need to accept that treating children simply as means to the political end of higher literacy and numeracy standards and greater proportions of students who acquire senior secondary school credentials, is both educationally and morally bankrupt. It damns children to the mediocrity of pre-planned, pre-specified and backward-mapped educational outcomes.

Richardson viewed his curriculum as a ‘work in progress’ in which the interests and needs of the children and the ‘urgencies’ of the environment could influence the daily plan on an on-going basis. A storm, a visitor, a new bull in the paddock next door, the discovery of a wasps’ nest or other spontaneous event, could all change the day’s programme: ‘The day never came out as planned. A plan sort of damned the day to mediocrity’, he found. (MacDonald, 2010, pp. 206-207)

In her end of Term 2, Week 10, 2012 newsletter to parents, the Lincoln Heights School principal, Debbie Waikato, reported on the completion of the school’s refurbished community hall, and its opening event: the book launch by NZCER. She commented that, ‘when Elwyn Richardson’s name is mentioned we think of creativity, passion, pushing boundaries, nurturing children’s talents and potential and flair. We thank Elwyn for his many years of service to education and for the legacy he has left for others. It amazes me how many lives Elwyn has affected in person or through his art and literature’ (Waikato, 2012).

In her ‘Message to Parents’ in the same newsletter, Debbie Waikato thanked staff for their hard work during the term, ‘especially with the extra pressures that we have been faced with concerning potential class size changes, league tables and performance pay’. And she then urged the children’s parents ‘to make known to all those that listen, that our profession is being underserved by those that should know better. League tables and performance pay will not raise student achievement’ (Waikato, 2012).

Part of the problem is that we can no longer assume that our politicians and officials know better, or that they are prepared to listen. Elwyn Richardson’s child-centred approach survived at Oruaiti, in no small part, because the Director of Education, C. E. Beeby, prompted by National Art Director Gordon Tovey, took the time to find out what Richardson was trying to do and went to see for himself its material effects on children and their learning. Beeby supported Richardson against the strongly normative criticisms of the school inspectorate for having departed from the official curriculum, officially established Oruaiti as New Zealand’s first ‘experimental’ school, and helped ensure that Richardson was linked with Tovey, other advisers and professional artists in the Department of Education’s expanding Arts and Craft Branch, so that they could both support and learn from him (MacDonald, 2010, Chapter Eight).

As the Prime Minister's recent speech and the Ministry's *Statement of Intent 2012-2017* reveal all too well, those in charge of New Zealand public schooling these days appear to have little understanding of what education is. What they present as a righteous concern for children's entitlement to experience 'education success' is, in reality, a technocratic obsession with measuring 'value-added' teaching performance and 'value-for-money' partial government subsidies to state services that are becoming increasingly user-pays. With huge quantities of classroom generated and electronically uploaded student outcome data now at their disposal, government and officials may ever more precisely measure the cost of providing state education. Unfortunately, their understanding of its value is regressing.

Current ways are based on clearly articulated and predetermined pathways. The children are forced to state goals and are evaluated through criteria and standards that conform not to their own understanding of themselves in the world, but by expectations dissected from the forms and structures of adult thinking. (Phillips, 2012, p. viii)

The schooling past was never as universally good and benign as we might wish to remember it. And, child-centred progressivists have never fared particularly well against: (i) those who see the principal role of state education being to improve standards, society or the economy; or, (ii) those who see credentials as more important than the actual experience of learning. Nonetheless, we can recall an age in which creative educators in Aotearoa New Zealand were permitted, encouraged even, to challenge the political and bureaucratic conservatism that all too often condemns both children and teachers to mediocre educational experiences and a poverty of the human condition. It is never too late to turn again toward a new educational progressivism in state schooling. All it requires is for those in power to recognise children as persons, and to value education for itself.

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