

Editorial: Exciting Debacles

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We all inhabit a world in danger of being submerged in hyperbole, as well as in water. "Obscenity of cricket tour" shrieks a headline in the *Dominion Post* for July 8; "Baloney" is the retort coming from the normally mild-mannered mouth of the Leader of the Opposition, in response to a comment from a government minister; a breakdown in the Police communication system, leading to major delays in the 111 emergency dialup, becomes a "botchup"; and a post-mortem on the failure of the joint bid with Australia for the 2003 Rugby World Cup classifies it as a "debacle". However, not all hype is negative. We are now confronted with a raft of "exciting" developments: investments in the sharemarket present "exciting" prospects for the creation of financial wealth; takeovers of large companies provide "exciting" challenges; job advertisements allure us with "exciting" opportunities; an urban housing subdivision presents "exciting" possibilities; we live in "exciting" times.

By and large, education has escaped such verbal excess, but not any more. A recently-launched research monograph was presented as an "exciting" new title. Maybe! But perhaps the most ubiquitous epithet in education over the last year in review has been the word "debacle", constantly used over problems encountered in connection with the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA). One Ministry of Education official made the wry comment to me that the word NCEA was invariably accompanied in media reports with the word "debacle" – they just had to go together. "Botchup" was usually close at hand.

In his article written from the UK, and comparing "official school improvement" policies in England and New Zealand, **Martin Thrupp** comments that national education standards are not considered as media-worthy in New Zealand, and have not attracted such a heavy press (usually negative). But he also rightly notes that the recent furore over the NCEA at the high stakes Scholarship level may signal a change. His article compares recent school improvement policy in England and New Zealand and suggests some reasons for the differences, particularly

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the social class contexts of the two settings. Three related issues for New Zealand school improvement are also highlighted: the continuing risk of borrowing damaging managerial and performative school improvement policies from England, the idiosyncratic nature of many school improvement initiatives, and the need to take more account of school context.

This issue contains two articles on the NCEA "debacle", the first by **Warwick Elley**, **Cedric Hall** and **Reg Marsh**, all widely respected assessment experts, in this country and internationally, all highly critical of aspects of the current way in which this standards-based assessment has been conceived and run. They question the ideological stance of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and the Ministry of Education, in the face of world-wide research evidence from the extensive literature on the topic, and pull no punches about the inherent defects in the assessments, on the grounds of the quite unacceptable variability in the results. But their criticism is not gratuitous. Their article concludes with recommendations for 13 key changes or developments that are needed to redress the problems currently plaguing NCEA and Scholarship.

A complementary article by **Rosemary Hipkins**, from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, takes a somewhat "softer" line. While admitting the existence of operational problems with NCEA which have been widely publicised and have engendered such controversy, she attempts to locate the changes in assessment style within the "knowledge society" and the imperative for "life-long learning". She explores the consequences of asking assessment to serve this overarching goal at the same time as being available for accountability purposes – that is for "raising standards". These tensions must be resolved, not swept under the carpet.

Rob Strathdee, from Victoria University of Wellington, and **Therese Boustead**, from the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management (CEM) Centre, based at the University of Canterbury, attempt with considerable success to make more accessible the very important concept of "value added". The statistical procedures adopted at the Centre allow an assessment of school effectiveness to be made in various subject areas, by providing quality information on the impact on achievement which participating schools of all types make on their students. Undesirable "league tables" become unnecessary.

Catherine Savage, a senior lecturer in primary teacher education at Victoria University of Wellington, considers the fundamental issue faced by the Picot Report in 1988, which now underlies the current School Network Reviews: Is school administration to be managed centrally or

locally? How do we achieve a balance between national interests and local interests of schools? The current five-year Review moratorium provides a window of opportunity for considering fundamental aspects of our education system, which she highlights in a series of focus questions for discussion.

Effective teaching and its relation to standards are considered in an article from three staff members at the University of Auckland, **Lexie Grudnoff**, **Eleanor Hall** and **Bryan Tuck**. In another comparison between England and New Zealand, the authors note that performance management with teacher appraisal has become mandatory in both countries. In England there is a single set of comprehensive standards that function as statutory requirements for initial teacher education and certification as a qualified teacher. In New Zealand we have programme requirements for initial teacher education that are not aligned with either the standards for registration or the standards in employment contracts, and the standards are not legal requirements. The authors tease out the implications for effective teaching and teachers.

John Clark, from Massey University, takes us right back to the Canterbury Declaration of 1945, where the hand of educational philosopher Karl Popper is clearly evident. In this article the legacy of his views for teacher education are explored in relation to the first results from the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). In considering their impact in the wake of recent institutional mergers between universities and colleges of education, he notes that research has assumed greater importance, both as a means to increased productivity and in its role as an underpinning to good teaching. That teaching be research-directed is both a legislative requirement and a philosophical imperative.

Lex McDonald, from Victoria University of Wellington, argues that most teacher development programmes emphasise education and experience, the “what” and “how” of teaching. His article hypothesises that training is often overlooked as a powerful component of teacher development, consequently making achievement of expertise more problematic. Training can help the teacher move to higher levels of performance when the “what” and “how” are linked.

In the first of three articles on early childhood education, **Judith Duncan**, **Chris Bowden** and **Anne Smith**, staff of Otago University and Victoria University of Wellington, examine some of our current understanding about parent support and parent education approaches. They suggest that early childhood centres in New Zealand currently undertake valuable and worthwhile parent support through their present programmes and curricula, and argue that they should be

enabled to continue the key role they already play in New Zealand for family support.

Sarah Te One, from the Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, notes that as a result of a combination of research and policy initiatives in early childhood, there has been a growing interest in young children’s rights. It is a complex discourse characterised by ambiguous understandings of what children’s rights are. With this as its prime focus, her article discusses some of the main early childhood policies and documents from the mid-1980s until 2002, when the Ministry of Education released *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*, a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education.

A key component of the *Strategic Plan* was a staged requirement for teachers in positions of “person responsible” in early childhood centres to have a Diploma of Teaching ECE or equivalent qualification. **Sola Freeman**, a tutor in the Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, with a long-term involvement with Montessori education in Wellington, analyses the impact of the first stage of the qualification requirement, using the results of a small qualitative study of six Montessori early childhood centres.

Finally, in our curriculum article for the issue, **Rachel Bolstad**, from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, examines the place of environmental education/education for sustainable development (EE/ESD) in the school curriculum. Despite international calls for it to form the pillar of a re-oriented approach to school curriculum, teaching, and learning, in most schools the principles of EE/ESD are poorly understood, and it occupies a marginal place in curriculum and teaching practice. This article considers its “place” in the New Zealand curriculum, and the potential to align it with a “place-based” education (PBE) approach in New Zealand schools.

There you have it. A great range of articles, with good reading for all. I sincerely trust that authors or readers locate no “debacles” or “botchups”, although it is always a possibility that the editorial or production process, however conscientiously carried out, may have a moment of catastrophic failure. Much as I would like to, I cannot really claim that it is an “exciting” publication, but it is my hope that it may at least contain some articles to whet the appetite, to push back the research boundaries, to stimulate interest, and revive flagging energies in presenting quality educational opportunities for our many students.

And that’s no baloney!