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"Official School Improvement" in England and New Zealand: A Cautionary Comparison

MARTIN THRUPP

Abstract:

This article compares recent school improvement policy in England and New Zealand and suggests some reasons for the differences, particularly 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.

As a small economy, New Zealand tends to be more a borrower than a lender of education policy. For historical and cultural reasons one of the main places borrowed from is the UK, particularly England. Yet although modern communications ostensibly make it quite easy for governments to take up policies from other countries, policy borrowing is rarely a straightforward matter. As Levin (1997) points out, it is often only the "sign" rather than the "substance" of policy which is transferred, because national contexts still count for a great deal in policymakers' thinking about the potential take-up of particular policies. These generally have to fit or be made to fit a quite distinctive set of national and local historical, social, economic and political circumstances.

As someone who has been working in both England and New Zealand over the last few years, I have found it instructive to consider this issue in relation to recent school improvement policy in these two settings. In this article I compare the features of, and backgrounds to, school improvement policy in England and New Zealand, before

considering three issues for New Zealand school improvement which such a comparison invites. The first, notwithstanding the point about local context made above, is the continuing risk of borrowing damaging managerial and performative school improvement policies from England. The second is the idiosyncratic nature of local school improvement initiatives in New Zealand when compared to the more generally national approach taken in England. Finally, and related to both of the above, is the need to take more account of school context.

"Official School Improvement" in England

School improvement policy in England is heavily bound up with New Labour's schooling policy more generally – or, put another way, New Labour's policy for schools essentially ***is*** a policy of what Hatcher (1998) has called "Official School Improvement" (OSI). New Labour has been involved in a difficult balancing act which has involved: (i) maintaining a commitment to market forms and various differentiations within and between schools, clearly intended to maintain the loyalty of newly acquired middle class voters; (ii) taking up a highly directive and interventionist stance which has been intended to deliver raised standards and the new skills required in the labour market to increase the UK's international competitiveness; and (iii) trying to address "social exclusion" if not social inequality. This has resulted in a complex set of policies, which have not so much employed systematic reforms in provision, but have created add-ons, schemes, special programmes and pilots, many of which require schools or Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to bid for funds. They have included, for instance, Education Action Zones, Beacon Schools, Excellence in Cities, Special Measures, Fresh Start, Specialist Schools and City Academies. The commitment of OSI is to "standards not structures", that is, to finding out "what works", rather than going for wholesale changes in school organisation. It involves creating a "high challenge, high support" (Barber, 2000, p. 19) policy framework, and requires belief in the role of leadership and "effectiveness" as major determinants of school and student performance, rather than any "easy" acceptance that such performances might be constrained by socio-economic factors. Stringent targets have been set for outcome performances of schools, LEAs and the educational system overall. High stakes systems of accountability and testing have been seen as the solution to educational under-performance, and intervention has been targeted in inverse proportion to "success".

Embedded in this policy has been a significant change in the role of the state in relation to the public sector – an emerging shift away from the role of provider, and in some respects financier, of the public sector, to that of standards- and target-setter and auditor. The English school system is increasingly characterised by a blurring of private and public sector values and practices, with an increasing variety of roles and opportunities in the school system being opened up to private companies. Models and values of management and leadership have been directly borrowed from business, as schools are encouraged to be more like businesses and more business-like. Yet older discourses remain important. For instance, despite New Labour displaying an antagonism towards comprehensive education, many English educators remain committed to comprehensivism, and New Labour has taken a gradual approach in its introduction of "diversity" policies intended to create more differentiated schools, such as the "specialist schools" programme. It is also clear that New Labour has built on, rather than dispensed with, the key neo-liberal policies of the Conservatives, including Open Enrolment, Local Management of Schools and OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education) inspections (Tomlinson, 2005).

What all this means for individual schools depends a great deal on where they are positioned in the educational market. All schools are under considerable pressure, but for different reasons. Popular, usually high-SES schools are under pressure to meet LEA targets for student achievement and other matters such as attendance and staff performance management. But intense pressures on these schools also come from wanting to remain attractive to parents and retain the positional advantages that this brings. This leads to popular schools wanting to do as well as possible in published examination and Key Stage league tables and OfSTED reports, and also to be successful in bids for initiatives which bring status and resources (e.g., becoming a Specialist School). For less popular, usually low-SES, schools, the issues relate more to surviving than prospering. These schools are under much greater scrutiny from LEA staff charged with school improvement. If an OfSTED inspection is failed, this leads to "special measures" and the very real prospect of a school being closed or replaced by a City Academy.

Now it might be argued that such pressures must lead to an increase in performance. However the evidence to date is that the test gains are small and mostly related to "teaching to the test" (Wiliam, 2001; Tymms, 2004). Increased emphasis on assessment against narrow criteria reduces

the curriculum, as the "tail wags the dog", encouraging schools and teachers to teach to the test/target/inspection/performance management goal. Thus Gillborn and Youdell discuss what they call the "A-to-C economy" in which "almost every aspect of school life is re-evaluated for its possible contribution to the headline statistic of the proportion of pupils attaining at least 5 higher grade GCSE passes" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 12).

Such policies also have many other costs. Intensification of workloads leads to a decline in the informal activities which improve relationships between teachers and students and which can therefore be "traded on" in delivering the formal curriculum, for instance, "shooting the breeze" or "having a laugh" with a group of students, or running an after-school club for students centred on some personal enthusiasm. OSI in England has led to a decline in such "organic" extracurricular activity, as teachers struggle to find the time to manage their formal workloads, let alone anything extra (Gewirtz, 2002).

OSI in England has also encouraged those in schools to think of children, not in terms of their individual needs, but in terms of what advantages they can bring to the positional well-being of the school. This commodification occurs both in the initial recruitment of students and in the management of them once in the school. OSI encourages schools to recruit bright, middle class "able" children and avoid taking on "expensive" Special Educational Needs (SEN) and excluded students wherever possible (Ball, 2003; Bagley et al., 2001). This reorientation of schools is encouraged by government schemes which are aimed at offering special programmes for the "gifted and talented". To Bagley and colleagues these developments produce a "pronounced misalignment between the policy emphasis and market strategies of schools and the consumer interests of, in particular, parents of children with SEN" (2001, p. 306). It is probably difficult to overstate the importance of such intake "massaging" to the management of schools in England today. Indeed Gewirtz argues that:

> Within the context of the market and a performance-oriented education system, management, I would suggest, is severely limited because what it is effectively doing is producing a redistribution of students amongst schools. It cannot address the root causes of educational under-attainment. (2002, p. 116)

Once in schools, children are commodified and (some) are marginalised through decisions around setting and testing. For instance Gillborn and

Youdell (2000) note the occurrence of "educational triage", where decisions are made to focus on some students at the expense of others, depending on whether or not they are seen to have the potential to enhance their school's position in the examination league-tables.

School Improvement in New Zealand

Compared to England's approach, New Zealand education policy is less performative and less dominated by school improvement strategies. Rather, as outlined in a recent Ministry of Education annual report there is a research-informed concern with three "vital outcomes": (i) effective teaching for all students; (ii) family and community engagement in education; and (iii) quality providers (Ministry of Education, 2004a). The concerns with teacher effectiveness and parent and community engagement mean that school improvement has a different, more limited emphasis than in England where, despite a similar commitment to evidence-informed policy, it is "providers" (schools) which are most seen to need attention and are the focus of nearly all interventions. While increasing parent involvement in schools was an important part of New Labour's 2005 election campaign, recent changes to the required composition of school governing bodies are widely seen to be having the opposite effect.

The emphasis on effective or quality teaching can be seen in projects like Te Kotahitanga with its "effective teaching profile" (Bishop et al., 2004). The "Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis" also identifies quality teaching as the "key system influence" on achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. iii). It argues that "[t]he evidence reveals that up to 59% of variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes, while up to almost 21%, but generally less, is attributable to school level variables" (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. iv). The Ministry of Education also argues:

> New Zealand has so much variance evident in the achievement of students that appears to be linked to within-school variance. If the teacher/class effects are so much stronger than the school effects for diverse students then it is important to consider the policy implications. The focus on school-level rather than teacher-level influences has been dominant in the NZ school effects research. The new organising framework for the OECD *Indicators: Education at a Glance* (2002) identifies pedagogy and learning practices as key educational policy levers (p. 8). This greater focus on pedagogy represents an important shift in policy thinking with implications for teacher education, support for teachers, partnerships with families and communities, school leadership, governance, wider policy leadership and the work of the Education Review Office, amongst many linked influences. (Ministry of Education, 2004b)

The reason for this focus on effective or quality teaching in New Zealand policy is worth considering. Taken at face value it is about responding to research, but several other factors may be involved. Most obviously, if the solution to underachievement is primarily seen as teacher effectiveness, this is a much more "solvable" political problem than if it is primarily seen as an issue of social inequality and the segregated school intakes and disparities of school resourcing which result from this. The fact that Adrienne Alton-Lee, a former researcher on teaching, is now working for the Ministry of Education, also seems to have influenced New Zealand's policy in this area.[1] Finally there has not been the same climate of concern about schools in New Zealand as there is in England, a point taken up further below.

Comparison with England also highlights the Ministry's emphasis on parent and community engagement, rather than school improvement. Again the emphasis in this area is research-informed, if taken at face value. The argument is that:

> Research shows that the more the formal learning environment respects and affirms a learner's home environment and community and incorporates this into the learning process, the higher the likely level of achievement. Teachers and providers who respect the diversities inherent in families and communities and affirm and value the differences in practices and backgrounds by incorporating them into the learning environment, make the learning relevant and help to improve student achievement. (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 12)

This is refreshingly progressive after England, where it often seems that policymakers struggle over whether to be supportive to parents and communities, or punitive – in fining the parents of truants, for instance. On the other hand, England is a society where those who are not of the dominant white British ethnic group are simply expected to integrate into it, whereas it is clear from New Zealand Ministry of Education discourses in this area that to a large extent the emphasis on parents and community is about responding to the country's distinctive ethnic makeup and power-relations, and the consequent need to build

"partnerships" with Maori and engage with Pasifika communities (Ministry of Education, 2004a).

It is in the area of "quality providers" that New Zealand comes closest to OSI in England. There were amendments to the Education Act in October 2001 which required schools to describe their priorities for improvement and report on progress against targets. Changes to the National Education Guidelines mean that from 2003, schools' annual charters must contain long-term and annually updated sections describing the school's priorities for improvement. Schools also have to report on progress against their targets in the analysis of variance section of their annual report. This has been explained by the New Zealand Ministry of Education as being about:

- Making learning outcomes central to all debates about education and focussing on the impact of what we do on learning
- Requiring all providers to be much more deliberate, explicit and strategic about what improvements in student learning they will achieve and the basis from which they are making these judgements
- Increasing the systematic use of information to continuously improve institutional performance
- Developing leadership capacity for outcomes-focussed management across the education system, especially in the schooling sector. (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 9)

Backed by "SchoolSMART" which provides schools with achievement and other information specific to their school, and combined data about other schools, this new emphasis on outcomes and target-setting seems to signal a growth in managerial and performative policy. Yet there are some telling differences from the scene in England. To begin with, schools set their own targets rather than have targets set for them, as is often the case in England.[2] Second, there is still quite a lot of freedom in the way in which targets are set. Third, there are not yet punitive consequences for missing targets. All of this means that New Zealand's version of target-setting is still "soft-touch" compared to England's. The following Ministry of Education *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQs) and answers provide a flavour:

> *29 How many targets are required/necessary/desirable?*
>
> This is a decision that each school must make. It depends on issues like the complexity of the issues being addressed, the size of the school and the capacity of the staff to deal with many issues. Many successful development plans have involved very few targets that the whole staff can contribute to. Too many targets could have a diffusing or demoralising effect especially if all teachers are expected to contribute to all of them. On the other hand, if a few whole-school targets are really not appropriate, a large secondary school might consider having one or more targets for each faculty.
>
> *30 Do the targets have to be curriculum based?*
>
> The intention of the schools planning and reporting policy is to improve student outcomes. The outcomes that New Zealanders want from schooling are described in the New Zealand Curriculum. It covers Essential Skills, and attitudes and values, as well as Essential Learning Areas.
>
> Targets that focus on the development of values and/or attitudes may be relevant because of the impact of these things on student motivation, behaviour, etc., and their relationship to other aspects of learning. For example, it is known that bullying/harassment is an issue in New Zealand schools, and that harassment has serious consequences for children's learning. A target to reduce harassment would be a good target.
>
> *31 Do the targets have to be expressed as percentages?*
>
> No. If a target is to provide the planning and evaluation focus intended it needs to be described in some way that is observably better than the current outcome. A school may use any descriptors that can usefully measure whether progress has been made. In practice, many targets do involve trying to increase the number or proportion of students who reach or surpass a certain standard of performance or reduce the number of occurrences of incidents (such as bullying/harassment). Numbers or proportions have been found to be a useful way of describing targets and "before and after" outcomes. (Ministry of Education, 2004c)

One of the main reasons target-setting is less performative in New Zealand is that it is not part of a national testing regime. To date the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) has been able to satisfy the needs of policymakers while keeping national testing at bay, along with all the perverse effects noted previously.[3]

Another important feature of New Zealand school improvement policy is the Education Review Office (ERO). In the mid-1990s this was shaping up to be similar to OfSTED, with both the then head of ERO, Judith Aitken, and the then head of OfSTED, Chris Woodhead, publically identifying with the neo-liberal critics of education and

seeking to "name and shame" failing schools (Thrupp, 1998). While this approach has continued and in many ways intensified in England (with a hierarchy of school failure now including "serious weaknesses" as well as "special measures") it did not take off in New Zealand, where there was strong concern expressed about ERO's narrow focus on managerial compliance. ERO itself was subjected to several reviews of its activities (State Services Commission, 1997; Robertson et al., 1997; Rogers, 2001). The last of these carried out for the Labour government recommended that ERO take a more supportive "assess and assist" approach than previously. This is the line ERO has subsequently taken (Welch, 2004), with the result that ERO is now hardly the source of practitioner concern in New Zealand that OfSTED is in England.

A distinctive feature of New Zealand school improvement policy is the many local interventions in particular groups of schools. These are co-ordinated by the Schools Monitoring and Support (previously Schools Support) section within the Ministry of Education. Created in 1994 against a background of government reluctance to intervene in "failing schools", Schools Support undertook some 240 "safety net interventions" in schools at risk, and ran 16 school improvement projects involving 300 schools over the period 1994-2000 (McCauley & Roddick, 2001). Today about ten percent of all schools are receiving some form of support or assistance from the Ministry through some 30 school improvement initiatives.

Along with its emphases on effective teaching and family and community engagement in education, there are numerous ways that New Zealand's less performative approach to "quality providers" can be explained (Thrupp, 2001a). But inasmuch as governments in both settings are responding to perceived electoral concerns, a key issue is likely to be the different class structures of the two settings. England's OSI policies are in many ways a response to perceived middle class concerns about school standards. England has a long history of being a strongly class-differentiated society, with schools to match (Johnson, 1989), and the years of Conservative rule after 1979, along with concerns about the labour market, have affected how the English middle class now think about education for their children, and thus exert electoral pressure on education policy. Intense middle class anxiety over social mobility through education appears to have created powerful electoral pressures which are making New Labour's education policy more conservative that it would otherwise be (McCaig, 2000). For instance, New Labour's focus on "standards not structures" can be seen to

represent an attempt to drive up the quality of teachers, schools and student achievement without overturning the traditional class differentiation of English schooling, and the positional advantages for middle class parents which come with this.

In contrast, despite almost two decades of educational reform, it seems that middle class New Zealanders are typically less concerned (although not unconcerned) about positional advantage and associated issues of teacher quality, school improvement and student achievement, and New Zealand education policy in turn seems to reflect these lower levels of concern. Despite some important struggles, New Zealand schools and teachers have enjoyed more public and political support than they have in England – there hasn't been the same "media led public loss of educational consensus" as there has been in England (Muschamp, Jamieson, & Lauder, 1999, p. 103). The net effect of this is that while National may have branded itself "the party of standards" in the 1999 New Zealand election, there was little sense that this captured the electorate's concerns. More recently, Welch (2005, p. 15) has pointed out that there were three government reports last year which raised concerns about teacher quality. However, there is little sense yet that the New Zealand electorate is particularly concerned. Hence the new Minister in charge of primary and secondary education, David Benson-Pope, was confident enough about the compulsory schools sector to say of his portfolio that there were "no big issues on the table" (Welch, 2005, p. 14). Indeed it seems that national educational standards are not considered as media-worthy in New Zealand as they are in England, although individual assessment certainly is, with the recent furore over deficiencies in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) at the high-stakes Scholarship level. [See the article in this issue by Elley, Hall, & Marsh]. But the annual English phenomenon of the release of the latest exam or Key Stage test league tables being the leading national news story (and then being followed by several days media debate about whether the tests are getting too easy) seems a little overexcited from a New Zealand perspective. Similarly would we ever see a New Zealand politician promising to resign if test standards don't rise, as David Blunkett famously did in England?

This might say something about the relative influence of the media in New Zealand and England, but also a lot about the impact of New Zealand's different class context. New Zealand has never has been a classless society, but like many post-colonial societies it has developed a self-conscious egalitarianism in reaction to the 19th century Britain

that its settlers left behind (Eldred-Grigg, 1990). Indeed Lauder and Hughes (1990, p. 43) commented that "New Zealand has often been seen as a classless society, in contrast to Britain, which has been regarded as the epitome of a class society" after they found their class-related research findings contemptuously dismissed by editorials in New Zealand's major newspapers. Struggles around social justice in New Zealand have generally centred on the aspirations and rights of Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi. Discussion of class has been relatively uncommon in political and academic debate. As Easton (1996, p. 61) put it, "Class is not a subject that New Zealanders talk easily about." (See also Black, 2005). The role of egalitarian mythology in shaping both policy and popular thinking about education in New Zealand should therefore not be underestimated.

Life in New Zealand also has various other features which have allowed class differences to be more muted than in England and have sustained the belief in egalitarianism. These include less population pressure, smaller settlements, and fewer and less marked areas of urban deprivation. There is relatively little "old money" and the labour market in New Zealand also often acts to blur class distinctions. For instance many tradespeople are self-employed, and have higher incomes than professionals, while farmers have been a major occupational group, varying widely in their resources and class background. Higher education is also much less hierarchical in New Zealand than in England, so that there is little of the kind of competition for places in the "best schools" so as to access the most elite university settings, as happens in England. New Zealand has also been prosperous for much of its history, while in tough times out-migration, often to Australia, has acted as a pressure valve for middle class aspirations.

Another class-related difference has been the general absence in New Zealand of the neo-conservative dimensions of English society and politics. One effect has been that New Zealand education reforms have not been driven by the same political or media attacks on teachers and school standards as they have in England. As Dale and Ozga (1993) have observed, the Education Reform Act in England was the culmination of a decade of neo-liberal and neo-conservative struggle, but New Zealand's *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms stemmed from a more clearly neo-liberal agenda which did not reflect the dominant discourses in New Zealand education even a year before. Indeed as Jesson nicely put it: "The transformation that New Zealand has undergone has been so extreme that ours could be considered a freak amongst nations, the

Kampuchea of the free market, and 1984 could be considered Year Zero" (1999, p. 61).

Issues in New Zealand School Improvement

So far this article has compared school improvement policy in England and New Zealand, and suggested some reasons for the differences. In this section I suggest three issues in New Zealand school improvement which are highlighted by comparison with England:

- the continuing risk of damaging "policy borrowing";
- the idiosyncratic nature of many school improvement initiatives;
- the need to take more account of school context.

The continuing risk of damaging policy borrowing

In general the differences between OSI in England and what has been happening in New Zealand under Labour are to be celebrated, both because they have often reflected New Zealand's distinctive policy setting, and because England's OSI policy often provided a great example to other countries of how *not* to proceed. (Indeed that seems to be exactly how Welsh and Scottish policymakers view England at times, for instance, by pointedly turning away from Key Stage testing.) Yet there are some areas in which New Zealand's policy is becoming uncomfortably close to England's. One is target-setting, which despite the "soft-touch" approach noted earlier, could easily evolve into a more clearly performative approach. A second concern has to be the growth of "honey pot" management, by which the government can "steer from a distance" through bidding requirements. Welch (2005) quotes National education spokesperson Bill English as pointing out that there are now no fewer than 36 pools to which schools can apply for extra funds. Third, new programmes for existing principals and teachers aspiring to be principals seem to represent what Gronn (2003) calls "Designer Leadership" – the framing up of school leadership along managerialist and performative lines.

It is in the area of school leadership that the links to OSI in England are perhaps most palpable, because of the connections to England's National College of School Leadership (NCSL). On the Ministry of Education Leadspace website for principals, the Enet facility which has been used to allow dialogue between principals is "talk2learn", originally developed for England's National College of School

Leadership. There are links to the NCSL online communities pages and in the "Leadership" area of the website many other links to NCSL material. A press release from the Office of the Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, notes that a New Zealand principals' induction programme had been selected by the NCSL in Nottingham as one of five quality principal induction programmes internationally to be examined in a comparative case study. This is seen as a mark of success: "Not bad going for a very new venture in a very small country" (Education today and for the future, 2003). Yet it needs to be recognised that the main role of the NCSL is to act as conduit for OSI into schools. This can be readily appreciated by a trawl through the NCSL website which is at the centre of its operations in England (Thrupp, forthcoming). Thus, when the New Zealand Ministry of Education draws on NCSL materials for educating its principals, it will often be picking up the problematic emphases and values of OSI.

More generally, England's policymakers do actively promote their model of OSI overseas (e.g., Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000), and this is also done by "policy entrepreneurs" in the school effectiveness and school improvement movement, who are deeply implicated in the OSI policy programme (Ball, 1998; Thrupp, 2001b; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). Indeed it is academics who are largely reactive to, rather than critical of, OSI, who tend to be invited out to New Zealand by the Ministry of Education or cited in its publications.[4] While the influence of "on message" English academics may be inevitable, New Zealand educators also need to connect with more critical perspectives on OSI (e.g., Gewirtz, 2002; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001; Grace, 1998; Thrupp, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005) to ensure such work is met with a well-informed understanding of what is actually being offered.

The idiosyncratic nature of many school improvement initiatives

A striking feature of the New Zealand approach to school improvement when compared to OSI is the way much of it has been rolled out as local projects, some with just a few schools and some with 40 or more (Ministry of Education, n.d.). It is apparent that these different projects often have different focuses, for instance: ICT support (Cantatech, 14 rural schools in Canterbury); Literacy (Performance Enhancement in North Waikato [PEN], 16 Waikato schools); or student retention (Tamaki Achievement Pathway, 13 schools). At one level this can be seen as an important step away from a generic "one size fits all" approach to

national school improvement, as discussed below, and it also clearly allows the required focus on parent and community engagement, particularly as many of the projects are iwi-based[5]. But it does raise the question whether the chosen intention in any project is addressing the most salient needs of all the participating schools. Especially in bigger regional projects, it seems likely that some schools might not benefit much, because the chosen focus is already relatively strong there. Thus, while the assumption seems to be that all schools will benefit from involvement in such projects, it is likely that specific needs of some schools may not be adequately catered for. Compared to the more national approach taken under OSI in England, there is also much more risk that struggling schools may not be involved in any of these projects at all. While their coverage is extensive, it is by no means complete – there are still disadvantaged schools and areas in New Zealand which are not currently involved.

The need to take more account of school context

An important recent trend in school improvement research in England has been a focus on the specific social contexts of schools, leading to the growth of a literature on "differentiated school improvement". For example, the recent work of Harris and colleagues on "Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances" (Harris & Chapman, 2004; Harris et al., 2005) is stressing the significance of context-specificity much more than was the case even a couple of years ago. For instance, Harris and Chapman conclude that:

> As the long term patterning of educational inequality looks set to remain, to rely on standard or standardised approaches to school improvement that combine accountability, pressure and blame to force improved performance would seem unwise. In schools in difficult contexts, this is more likely to exacerbate the problem rather than solve it. Instead the evidence would suggest that more locally owned and developed improvement strategies are needed that appreciate school context, best match prevailing conditions and build the internal capacity for development within the school. If the goal of raising performance in schools in difficulty is to be achieved, school improvement approaches that neglect to address the inherent diversity and variability across and within schools in the same broad category will be destined to fail. (2004, p. 429)

This conclusion is consonant with Ruth Lupton's (2004) research which uses detailed case studies to illustrate the impact of the broad context of low socioeconomic schools, including both pupil characteristics (ethnicity, refugees, SEN) and school and area characteristics (urban/rural, market position compared to surrounding schools, LEA admissions policies, school type and history). As do Harris and colleagues, Lupton stresses that these differences between schools in poor areas lead to more and less favourable contexts for school improvement. Her aim is "not to imply that area context alone is important but to emphasize that the organizational impacts on schools in different kinds of disadvantaged areas can be significantly different" (p. 22). Lupton also makes the point that it is not always apparent what constitutes good practice in these unusual and challenging circumstances. Her argument for contextualized school improvement policy involves differentiated provision adapted to the specific needs in each school, a systematic recognition that differences in practice have implications for organisational design, redesign of the delivery of core teaching and learning activities, financial incentives for teachers, and job and career re-design.

Harris's and Lupton's research has some differences in emphasis, with many issues still to be resolved – for instance, the extent to which schools can reasonably build internal "capacity" in the face of particular kinds and combinations of external constraints.[6] Yet it is clear that differentiated school improvement poses an important challenge to OSI by highlighting the need to respond to social and organisational complexity in areas like assessment, target setting, inspection, performance management, staffing and funding. It will also pose a challenge for New Zealand, where in recent years policymakers have preferred to foster messages about the importance of high teacher expectations and the risk of deficit perspectives, at the expense of being realistic about the constraints and possibilities created by school context.

I would argue that New Zealand needs to develop an approach to school improvement which emphasises those school policies and practices which can help improve student progress in schools within distinctive kinds of social (and other) contexts. This school improvement discourse would recognise the importance of *both* agency and structure, rather than asking teachers and principals to concentrate on agency, at the expense of structure, as I believe tends to be the case at present.

Conclusion

In 1997, Gordon and Whitty concluded of England and New Zealand that there were "few places where [education] reform has proceeded with such similarity of pace, approach, rhetoric and policy patterns" with "marked and startling similarities both in the rhetoric of reform and in the distance travelled towards the entrenchment of neo-liberal policies" (p. 454). In 2005 this is no longer so obviously true, but policy borrowing clearly does continue. In the matter of school improvement there are certainly lessons to be learnt from England, but for the most part the lessons are about which policies to avoid rather than which to adopt. Under the circumstances, a cautious, critical approach by New Zealand policymakers and educators is appropriate.

Notes

1. See for instance Ministry of Education (2004c) FAQ 7 which argues that, "Research shows that quality teaching makes a difference: between 45 and 55% of differences in student outcomes can be attributed to teaching. New Zealand-based research provides insights into actions that will make a difference in the classroom. Writing in various issues of ***set*** (published by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research), Adrienne Alton-Lee and Graham Nuthall describe how schools can change outcomes for children in relation to both gender and ethnicity by making changes to the teaching and learning environments."
2. However the Secretary for Education does have the power to renegotiate an unsatisfactory charter.
3. Plans for national testing were advanced by National over 1997, dropped in March 1998, and picked up again in September 1999 just before National lost the election. At that point National announced a piloting of national testing in literacy and numeracy for 9 and 11 year olds in 125 schools, despite considerable opposition from academics and teachers. The incoming Labour government scrapped this pilot scheme.
4. See for instance the English school improvement work highlighted in the leadership area of the Leadspace homepage. See also the literature review of McCauley and Roddick (2001) and the article by Nixon (2004).
5. An iwi is a Māori tribe, a hapu a sub-tribe.
6. With Hugh Lauder, Harvey Goldstein and Tony Robinson, the author recently has recently begun work on the "Primary school composition and student progress" project, a large study of compositional effects across Hampshire primary schools, funded by the Economic and Social

Research Council. This research will also contribute to a differentiated account of school improvement.

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The author

Martin Thrupp's interests are in the sociology of education, education policy and education management. After teaching in New Zealand schools and lecturing at the University of Waikato, he moved to the UK where for the last six years he has held posts at King's College London, and the Institute of Education, University of London.