

Editorial: Neo-this and Neo-that

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Novelty carries with it a certain attractiveness. This appeal of what is new is itself not new. Back in Athens in the early years of the 1st century, the Apostle Paul encountered it: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."¹ He used the opportunity afforded him by their openness to new information to engage the citizens in dialogue, arguing powerfully for a more adequate worldview, which he presented for their earnest consideration.

Educational research generally involves the quest for something new. Every piece of fresh research represents a pushing back, perhaps ever so slightly, of the boundaries of knowledge, a searching for previously unknown relationships, a suggested explanation for hitherto unsolved problems or dilemmas. But in many cases, educational research simply uncovers more issues to be researched. Definitive solutions are elusive, and even "best evidence syntheses" may not provide unequivocal answers to enlighten classroom behaviour. Human and situational variables are too potent in education.

But even "new" knowledge can be problematic. Economist J. M. Keynes is reported as saying, "The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas, as in escaping from old ones." And we are now faced with the situation that putting the preposition "neo-" in front of a word may carry pejorative overtones. Just think of what is implied by the term "neo-Nazi". There are examples of this in the articles that follow. Elizabeth Rata in her courageous critique of Kaupapa Maori, cited on p. 48, uses the term "neo-traditionalism"; Karen Dobric uses the term "neo-conservative" on p. 94 to refer to a system with an "emphasis on order, hierarchies and cultural transmission", and several authors refer at some length to "neo-liberalism" in terms which suggest they are not entirely comfortable with its emphasis on competitiveness in a market environment, and are looking for a "third way". The current vogue of "constructivist" approaches in science is called into question in another article on p. 195 of this issue. Alternative discourses, yet to be advanced, may have greater validity in describing how children learn.

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The question also needs to be asked about "neo-" knowledge: how "valid" is it; in what sense can such information be called "true". The incredible success of the internet search program Google is highlighted in the editorial in a recent issue of the *Listener*,² where it is noted that the computer algorithm used in the PageRank system may not necessarily place the most accurate and well-validated information at the top of the list, where it is likely to be accessed most often, and therefore provide the largest input into contemporary intellectual discourse. The advent of Wikipedia, involving a sharing of un-validated information over the internet, is another example, although the same *Listener* article does note that even the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* contains a substantial, although lesser, number of errors. The editor quotes futurologist Paul Saffo, saying, "we risk huddling together into tribes defined by shared prejudices."

The fact that all the articles in this journal are peer reviewed is intended to go some way towards answering these concerns. Even when an article has to be substantially rewritten following the process (as was the case with some articles in this issue), the authors are invariably appreciative of the input of the voluntary reviewers. As editor, I have adopted the general practice of not using anonymous or "blind" reviewers, but instead espousing a more collaborative and participatory model. Our reviewers are encouraged to engage in dialogue with authors, to help them validate and improve their work, and beginning authors report they find this particularly helpful.

The first three articles focus largely on the tertiary scene in New Zealand. In the first, **Rob Strathdee**, from Victoria University of Wellington, reviews recent developments in tertiary educational policy, and considers their implications for skill development and innovation. He identifies network creation as a key aim of the Labour-led coalition and, in assessing its impact on the competition for advancement through education, argues that in some respects, Labour has been more conservative than previous New Right governments in New Zealand.

Nick Zepke and **Linda Leach**, of Massey University, examine tertiary student retention, progression and achievement, which have become major policy issues in New Zealand, and the English-speaking world generally. In examining the New Zealand government's emerging policy framework for improving student outcomes, the authors suggest that concern for student learning and success is justified, but question some of the underlying assumptions behind the policies. Focusing on system-wide accountability using crude statistical indicators can lead to undesirable sanctions. The article argues that the evidence does not support a generic and punitive approach as a way of

improving student outcomes. A reframing of both accountability and research evidence may be a better policy alternative.

Next, **Margaret Wilkie**, a PhD student studying post-graduate education at Victoria University of Wellington, takes her cue from Article Three of the Treaty of Waitangi, which promises Maori equal rights to enjoy the benefits of citizenship in Aotearoa/New Zealand. After more than a century of bad news about the failure of the education system to uphold that promise, she sees a renaissance through the emergence of Kaupapa Maori from within the Maori world itself, with the ability to reframe problems and implement Maori-centred solutions, at all levels of education.

David Stuart, of the Ministry of Education Research Division, explores contemporary commercial school-business relationships in New Zealand schools, in a context of the blurring of once clear boundaries between children's learning, their entertainment experiences, and the commercial efforts of corporate marketing and public relations. Three problematic features of contemporary consumer capitalism are considered: inequality, commodification and globalisation, and the article examines how schools and classroom teachers are currently managing their commercial school-business relationships.

In carrying on our series of articles on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), **Karen Dobric**, Senior Lecturer at the Academic Development Centre of the Manakau Institute of Technology, summarises her doctoral research project based on a theory of discourses used to throw light on the period between 1996 and 2000, when the adoption of policy for the NCEA was the subject of vigorous discussion. The approach taken was to analyse interviews with key policy actors by applying a theory of qualifications and assessment discourses to identify the ideological underpinnings of the debates over the introduction of a standards-based assessment system.

Three authors from Waikato University, **Bronwen Cowie**, **Alistair Jones** and **Ann Harlow**, draw from the findings of the secondary school *Digital Horizons: Laptops for Teachers* research study, to discuss the impact of a policy tool intended to assist teachers use information and communication technologies (ICT) for administration, communication, collaboration, lesson planning and preparation, as well as for classroom lessons. Drawing on Engelbart's notion of improvement infrastructure, they discuss factors that have the potential to accelerate the integration of the laptop into teachers' professional lives. Analysis suggests that these factors include school and departmental leadership as well as the nature of the professional development that teachers experience.

Helen May, formerly the Director of Early Childhood Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, and now Head of the Faculty of

Education at the University of Otago, gives us an overview of the progress towards implementing the government's Early Childhood Strategic Plan 2002-2012 in the context of the election politics of 2005. This highlighted social and economic divides in which the so-called "nanny state" offered some differing solutions for the care and education of its youngest children.

A second article from the early childhood sector, by **Kate Thornton**, of the School of Early Childhood Teacher Education at Victoria University of Wellington, explores how leadership is defined and enacted in the New Zealand ECE Centres of Innovation (COI). Although the three COI in this study represented different early childhood services, strong similarities were found; leadership was regarded as a shared endeavour, and was characterised by courage, commitment and collaboration.

Two curriculum articles conclude this issue. **Rowena Taylor**, senior lecturer in social studies and geography education in the School of Educational Studies at Massey University, notes that after a chequered history, social studies is now developing a higher profile and greater credibility in secondary schools, the defining factor being its inclusion for national qualifications since 2002. This article links the progress towards "maturity" of social studies in New Zealand secondary schools with the three stage subject development model postulated by Layton, in his study of science teaching in English schools.

Finally, in our overseas-authored article for this issue, **Veronica McCauley**, **Kevin Davison** and **Keith Sullivan**, of the National University of Ireland, Galway, note that, at a time of economic growth in Ireland, the declining numbers of students enrolling in the sciences is emerging as an educational concern. Using a 2002 Government of Ireland commissioned report on science: *The Task Force on the Physical Sciences (TFPS)* as a guide, this article examines initiatives aimed at promoting science education, in relation to recent social, philosophical, economic and cultural changes in the Republic of Ireland. The resultant shifts in thinking about science teaching, and the innovative pedagogical strategies they advocate as a consequence, could well have relevance for science teaching here in New Zealand.

There should be something new (perhaps even novel) here to satisfy all tastes, and I have much pleasure in presenting the distilled wisdom of these 15 authors to you for your consideration.

Notes

1. Acts 17:21, New International Version of the Bible.
2. Stirling, P. (2006, June 17). What do you think? Editorial. *Listener*, p. 9.