

Editorial: The educational landscape in 2011-2012

The second term of a National-led government has generated a number of new policies that are impacting all areas of the education sector. The global economic situation has continued to be an issue in 2011 and 2012, and the Better Public Service Results Targets announced by the Government in June 2012 show ongoing attention to seeking efficiencies and value for the taxpayer dollar, and increased accountability measures in the compulsory sector. The trend of New Zealand universities to seek international full-fee paying students through agreements between international institutions and foreign governments has continued.

Increasing participation of children in early childhood education to 98 percent is one of the Better Public Service Results Targets. Achievement disparities and retention at the secondary level are also reflected in the Targets such as increasing from 67 to 85 percent of 18-year-old students gaining NCEA Level 2 or equivalent by 2017. A tertiary sector Target is to increase the number of 25 to 34-year-olds with qualifications at Level 4 or above.

Concerns about student achievement and how to measure it have been central to many education policy initiatives. At the primary level, debates about the notion of national standards and their implementation, including the publication of mathematics, reading and writing standards at the primary level, continue to dominate the media. The relatively lower performance of the education system for Māori and Pasifika continues to be an issue, as does the associated retention of students in secondary schools.

The papers in this issue consider the impact of policies within the education sector during 2011 and into 2012, and link back to historical issues and forward to possibilities for future change. In keeping with the kaupapa of this journal, the papers provide reviews of issues in specific sectors of tertiary, secondary, primary schooling and early childhood education.

The first paper by **Geraldine McDonald** outlines aspects of the system such as demographics and discusses associated unintended consequences on student achievement. Using PIRLS data, she highlights ways in which education systems are organised in terms of entry, promotion and retention practices and identifies two key types: the first type is where students enter on a fixed date and automatically progress year by year, and the second type where there is a predominant age cohort arising from the combined effect of entry, promotion and retention. She argues that such system characteristics shape the patterns of system-level attainment scores reported in international comparison studies such as PISA.

Ann Pairman considers why the relationship between the physical environment and learning at the early childhood level is a “blind spot” in the New Zealand early childhood discourse. In the first part of her paper, Pairman considers evidence that the physical environment for learning has been mostly overlooked in research about quality education. She compares New Zealand’s minimum standards with other OECD countries as well as considering research from architecture, and environmental and social psychology and concludes that bulk funding and the rise of the corporates have impacted on the physical environment. She concludes with a call for more attention to the relationship between physical environments and learning.

Linda Hogg’s paper about issues of social justice in schooling examines the theoretical frameworks underpinning funds of knowledge literature from an analysis of fifty texts. She suggests that the funds of knowledge theorising may be helpful in addressing the prevalent deficit theorising of ethnic minorities in schooling. While identifying a range of theoretical positions she identified two, out of a total of five, key theoretical framings as sociocultural theories of learning and critical theory. She summarises the key ideas for each of the five theoretical framings and the implications for student learning. Hogg concludes by arguing that transforming values and beliefs underpinning practice can be discussed through more explicit discussion of theoretical framing.

Rachel Bolstad synthesises the principles for future-oriented education in light of a discussion of issues and possibilities for the

New Zealand education system. Critiquing the term “21st century learning” she suggests that it has lost the idea of being future-oriented when applied to system-level change that supports future-focused practices in classrooms and schools. She identifies six emerging principles of: personalised learning; equity, diversity and inclusivity; a curriculum that uses knowledge to develop learning capacity; “changing the script” – rethinking learners’ and teachers’ roles; a culture of continuous learning for teachers and educational leaders; and new kinds of partnerships and relationships – schools no longer siloed from the community. In her conclusion she argues that to impact the system these principles need to be thought of as a coherent set rather than as isolated ideas.

Examining the impact on achievement of secondary school students’ extracurricular activities, **Kirsty Weir, Luanna Meyer, John McClure, and Damian O’Neill** outline the ongoing debate about the threshold effect of extracurricular activities. They compare self-report data from a longitudinal study of over 2,000 students with achievement records. Their results suggest that moderate levels of extracurricular activities are potentially beneficial to academic achievement, but that rather than a linear threshold effect, an inverted U relationship to achievement may better represent the complexity of the impact of activities on achievement. They identified a trend that students working a small amount of paid work (5 hours or fewer) had higher academic achievement than greater amounts of paid work (20 hours or more) or no paid work at all.

Vijaya Dharan, Luanna Meyer and Nicole Mincher examine the topical issue of stand-downs, suspensions, expulsions, and exclusions and ask whether the associated policies and practices are working to keep students in secondary schools. They review the key government initiatives and trends since 2000 across ethnic groups and conclude that the problem of an unequal ethnic distribution of students in disciplinary data persists. They go on to discuss school-related and external factors contributing to lower school engagement and its consequences. They conclude by advocating for inclusionary – such as restorative and positive behavior support approaches – rather than exclusionary discipline measures of suspensions and expulsions.

Pasifika educational tertiary policy and research in New Zealand is the focus of **Lex McDonald and Tavita Lipine's** paper. They examine the results of a study that aimed to identify the critical dimensions contributing to minority group school achievement. In identifying four inter-related ideas – learning impact factors, student learning preferences, personal psychological qualities, and specific culturally related characteristics – they note the central importance of fa'asamoa for each factor in providing reciprocal structures that support an individual's success. In making a number of recommendations for policy and practice they recognise the shift from deficit theorising to more deliberate planning for Samoan students' educational success from their early education onwards.

In the final paper, a thematic review of literature about the teaching and learning of Chinese students, **Carolyn Tait** uses Biggs' (2003) Student Approaches to Learning Theory to argue the influence of both teaching context and home environment on Chinese learners studying abroad. This paper is timely given the increasing numbers of Chinese students in New Zealand tertiary institutions. She highlights the importance of lecturers having an understanding of Chinese students' culture, particularly in relation to motivation and engagement, and the influences on learning and teaching. The paper ends with a useful discussion of the adjustments that face Chinese students in a new learning environment, challenges assumptions held about this group of students, and suggests alternative strategies that lecturers could employ.

The themes of these papers reflect a number of concerns in the educational landscape in 2011 and 2012 and offer useful commentary and discussions of ways of addressing them for the future. We take this opportunity to thank all our past and present editorial board members as well as our reviewers for their contributions to the journal.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

Joanna Higgins