

Murray Lucas

A Former Principal's View and Experience of the Ministry of Education's Involvement in Contemporary Education Issues in New Zealand

Abstract

This commentary provides a former principal's perspective on contemporary educational issues and the role of the Ministry of Education in addressing these. In the author's experience, when the Ministry of Education works with principals, positive changes have begun to happen, although often not to the stage of embedding these changes. Problems can emerge when the Ministry of Education makes decisions without involving the sector.

Keywords education policy, schools, implementation, principal, educational issues

Murray Lucas is currently lead principal of the Tawa kahui ako. Previously he had 22 years experience as principal of Horowhenua College and Tawa College. He has a passion for restorative practice in schools, as well as for mathematics and science education.

Ted Wachtel, the founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, once said, 'human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour, when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them' (Wachtel, 2016). As I bring a principal's perspective to examining Ministry of Education policies, I find it useful to consider those policies' impact through the prepositions 'with', 'to', and 'for'.

I was a principal of two co-educational state secondary schools for 22 years. These were, in turn, Horowhenua College and Tawa College. It would be fair to say that

over that time, the ministry has been increasingly willing to work with principals and the teaching sector. It has consulted with carefully selected representative groups and developed responses to many issues. Issues that I have been directly involved with include: the revision of the effectiveness and credibility of the NCEA system; appropriate strategies to deal with behavioural challenges in schools; strategies to address the concerning mental health of students; and the importance of collaboration among schools on matters of teaching and learning. I will explore these in turn, drawing out points of relevance to wider processes of policy implementation.

The 2019 NCEA review

The recent review of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) appeared to show a considerable improvement from the time when School Certificate was replaced with NCEA (around 2002). In the review phase it was impressive to see the extent to which principals were trained to encourage responses from many involved people – school leaders, teachers, students, parents, whānau, and the business sector. The consultation phase was well managed, and all ethnic groups were intentionally included. The process involved was excellent, and a highly qualified group of experts developed the outcomes.

For example, during the NCEA review period, a Ministry of Education group involved with the review spent a day shadowing the five members of the Tawa College senior leadership team over a normal school day. The feedback from those visitors at the end of the day included surprise that none of the senior staff had time for a lunch break, and also at the large number of different, important and often urgent issues the senior leaders had had to juggle in the course of the day. The ministry staff felt that this was a valuable exercise and it enabled them to start to understand the context in which Ministry of Education initiatives were received. I was impressed by their approach.

However, I know there were many who spent considerable time listening to different ideas and presenting carefully considered submissions who were left disappointed. One example was the

I felt that the NCEA review would have been more effective if assessment and curriculum were key parts of one government department rather than two government departments (the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority), which is the current situation.

number of submissions from students on the importance of 'soft skills'. 'Soft skills' are non-technical skills that describe how students work and interact with others. These skills are key components of the core competencies that are outlined in the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum. There is a realisation that it is not easy to translate 'soft skills' into quantifiable data, but there did not appear to be much effort to look beyond New Zealand to see if these important skills have been assessed constructively elsewhere.

I felt that the NCEA review would have been more effective if assessment and curriculum were key parts of one government department rather than two government departments (the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority), which is the current situation. This can lead to fragmentation of curriculum and assessment and a lack of consistency and cohesive approaches between the two organisations in a reform such as the current NCEA Change Programme.

Behavioural management in schools

I also had first-hand involvement with Ministry of Education endeavours to deal with challenging behaviour in schools. The ministry developed a suite of programmes to support schools in promoting positive behavior. They came under the umbrella of Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) (Ministry of Education 2010). Two particular programmes that I was privileged to be part of were Restorative Practices and My FRIENDS Youth (Ministry of Education 2012).¹

In 2006 the Ministry of Education had expressed some concern about a high number of suspensions and stand-downs at Tawa College. To their credit, they were proactive in suggesting a way forward, and they put me in contact with Mark Corrigan, a ministry employee, whose input proved invaluable in implementing restorative practice at the college. Since 2009, restorative practice has made a positive difference to the climate of Tawa College. It involved the teaching staff working proactively with the board, the students and the whānau to work through minor and major infractions in a manner that addresses causes of poor behaviour and listens to the stories of all those involved in the situation.

In 2011 the ministry established a reference group to develop a strategy for promoting restorative practices in schools across New Zealand. The group comprised ministry staff, principals, teachers and guidance counsellors, as well as effective trainers in this area. This reference group was an excellent example of the ministry working with principals and the sector to develop this worthwhile programme. One very positive outcome was an effective set

of manuals dealing with the various aspects of restorative practices: Fundamentals, Circles and Conferences (Ministry of Education 2014).² The manuals were well presented and also had effective training modules that schools could use with their staff. After some teething troubles, the reference group was well chaired and the Ministry of Education representatives both listened and consulted. Unfortunately, there were ministry personnel changes, the facilitator moved on and the replacement, although well-meaning, had very little understanding of restorative practice and so momentum was lost.

With the new facilitator, meetings of the reference group became irregular and the ministry decided that restorative practice should be outsourced. Reference group members were involved in selecting the organisation to assist restorative practice in schools. It would be unfair to comment on how effective this was, but it would be prudent to reflect on the wisdom and overall effectiveness of outsourcing. I thought the reference group should have continued to meet, albeit less regularly, to keep a watching brief on the accessibility of training and on the effectiveness of this training.

In retrospect, the reference group should have included a representative of the colleges of education, so that teachers' pre-service training could have involved some instruction on restorative practices. In a 2011 evaluation of restorative practices in New Zealand, author Liz Gordon stated: 'It appears that only the University of Waikato offers a voluntary course in restorative practices'. She commented further: 'If these practices are so successful in bringing about some core goals for New Zealand education ... it is surprising the approach is not covered in all courses' (Gordon, 2011, p.54).

It was also frustrating that the number of schools that wanted to take up restorative practice support exceeded capacity, and once again momentum was lost. I believed that the publication of the excellent resources meant the time was right to extend the programme to as many schools as possible.

Another personal observation is that with behaviour initiatives, some of the key decision makers within the Ministry of Education do not appear to stay with a

The National government, under Minister of Education Hekia Parata, developed the idea of communities of learning, which subsequently became known as *kāhui ako* ...

proven and effective policy, but look for the next new initiative. In this case it appeared to be promoting KiVa as a method to deal with bullying. KiVa is an anti-bullying programme that has been developed in Finland. It is an effective evidence-based programme that is relatively expensive and therefore difficult to access for a number of New Zealand schools.

Strategies for students' mental health

One of the other programmes related to building health, wellbeing and resilience was My FRIENDS Youth. This programme was underpinned by cognitive behaviour therapy, which was the gold standard for dealing with anxiety.

It was an Australian programme that the Ministry of Education purchased and began trialling in New Zealand schools. There were some challenges both in training facilitators and then in extending the training to pilot schools in New Zealand. Tawa College was involved, but after the initial training many schools pulled out. The trainers did not appear to understand student behaviour in a classroom context.

Tawa College persevered, and we were well supported by two excellent teachers, one North Island-based and one South Island-based, who served as the national facilitators. Using a research team based at Massey University, the programme was evaluated effectively in some of the New Zealand pilot schools, and this – commendably – involved both student and teacher voices. The summary of the evaluation report concluded:

This evaluation report shows that the My FRIENDS Youth Resilience Programme aligns with government strategies, is consistent with the *New Zealand Curriculum* key competencies and the health and physical education curriculum, and can be effectively facilitated by teachers for all Year 9 students, including priority learners. (MacDonald et al., 2015, p.1)

The report indicated that the programme could be enhanced if it were adapted using a Māori cultural lens, and the Ministry of Education began the process. It was also determined that an online programme was preferable to a paper-based one. The ministry ensured that the rewrite or adaptation was reviewed by psychologists, and the pilot schools were excited about this programme, which could have done much to alleviate student anxiety. Again, I was fortunate to be part of a reference group which looked at the resources.

There was a silence about the programme for a long time, and then we were told that the ministry would not be proceeding with the My FRIENDS Youth initiative, although pilot schools could continue to use the resources for a limited period of time. To the best of my knowledge no reason was given. The lack of further communication from the ministry was disappointing, and a worthwhile mental health initiative was mothballed and any momentum was stopped.

Reflecting on the abrupt pause of both of these programmes from the perspectives of a principal and teachers in my school, it is this kind of lack of continuity in programmes that is frustrating to schools and the 'churn' of changes makes it difficult

to navigate and not become cynical about the next programme.

School collaboration: kāhui ako/ communities of learning

Another interesting development was the acknowledged need to increase collaboration among schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The National government, under Minister of Education Hekia Parata, developed the idea of communities of learning, which subsequently became known as kāhui ako (Ministry of Education, 2023). This had its initial challenges, as funding in New Zealand schools is roll-based and this leads to competition among schools, rather than the collaboration sought. The unions representing the primary and secondary school sectors had differing views on this initiative, and two different agreements were developed with the Ministry of Education. This meant there were different criteria for the various roles within a kāhui ako, and also different remuneration for these roles.

A commendable aim of kāhui ako was that teachers had a vested interest in the students throughout their school pathway, and not just for the year they were in their class. This worked particularly well when the contributing schools were geographically and philosophically aligned, and the majority of primary-aged students would advance from year 1 to year 13 within the same kāhui ako. Each kāhui ako was required by the ministry to develop its own 'achievement challenge' according to prescriptive criteria, and initially the focus had to be on lifting academic achievement. Later on there was greater flexibility, and health and wellbeing goals and culturally responsive pedagogy goals were included alongside academic achievement.

I was fortunate to be given a sabbatical in 2021 to look at the effectiveness of kāhui ako throughout New Zealand. I was most impressed with the teacher-only days I attended involving all schools in the kāhui ako, but also by the ways schools were dealing with key transitions in a student's educational pathway. It was not universally successful, in that it worked better with geographically aligned schools and less well with inner-city schools where there were multiple pathways for a student to choose,

The concept of schools having learning support coordinators was welcome and needed, but the allocation of these was not appreciated by those schools that missed out, and there were a considerable number.

particularly with regard to secondary schools. Another advantage was that teachers with specific expertise could now not only benefit the school they were from, but this expertise could be shared across the kāhui ako.

Feedback from kāhui ako also included concern with regards to lengthy application forms for lead principals and across-school leaders. These forms took many hours to complete. Also, there were challenges to involving early childhood educators in the process. Nevertheless, the notion of collaboration between schools and across education sectors is worthy and I believe that kāhui ako have a future in New Zealand education. (See also Kamp, 2019.)

Policies, to be effectively enacted and developed, must be predicated on effective relationships. The ministry seemed to realise this and assigned a ministry adviser to each principal. The idea was good, but the reality is that it depends on the education adviser remaining in that job for

a reasonable length of time. My initial experience at Tawa College was disappointing in that the school had multiple education advisers of those critical early years. Also, the college was not always notified of changes of our adviser. Fortunately, in my last years as principal Tawa College had the same education adviser, and she was hugely supportive and helpful in keeping the school informed and checking how we were progressing policies. In particular, her support over lockdown periods was outstanding. The education adviser is a vital role and there needs to be some incentive given to keep the Ministry of Education adviser in that role.

Lack of continuity has also been evident with regard to the property adviser and the learning support adviser. When the Ministry of Education does not retain staff in critical liaison areas, this has a major impact on schools in both the efficiency and quality of school change.

Another area of concern is professional learning development. This was addressed eloquently by Bali Haque when he stated:

We have created an over complex and incoherent approach to teacher PLD. Teachers have for decades been forced to interpret and implement the curriculum without adequate support and resources. Wheels have constantly been reinvented and workloads have skyrocketed with the MOE acting as no more than a PLD broker and procurement adviser. (Haque, 2021, p.4)

After wide consultation across New Zealand at the request of the current government, Haque and the independent taskforce he chaired produced a worthwhile document titled *Our Schooling Futures: stronger together* | Whiria Ngā Kura Tūātitini (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019).

Unfortunately, there have been cases in which the Ministry of Education has not worked with the sector and the result has been disappointing. An example of this was the introduction of learning support coordinators in New Zealand schools. The concept of schools having learning support coordinators was welcomed and needed, but the allocation

of these was not appreciated by those schools that missed out, and there were a considerable number. First, there was no process by which schools could present their case and provide evidence, particularly financial, to indicate their need of such personnel. Instead, schools were informed that in tranche one they either were granted learning support coordinators or they were not. Tawa College was one of the unfortunate schools to miss out, but we were given initial hope that there would be further tranches and support from the Ministry of Education adviser with regard to the application. Soon after this, we learned that the ministry was not proceeding with providing further learning support coordinators. I believe this unfortunate situation could have been avoided if

principals had been part of the allocation process. A recent evaluation of these learning support coordinators shows that they have been highly effective in supporting school communities to provide appropriate care and learning for students with high learning needs. It is a real pity that all schools did not benefit.

This is one principal's view of working with the Ministry of Education to implement policies and practices in the past 20 years. In summary, some good educational progress has been made when the ministry has worked with the sector. There have been some worthwhile initiatives, such as restorative practices, kāhui ako (collaborative learning) and learning support coordinators. However, there are still a number of barriers which prevent schools being as effective as they

could be in this area. These include the impact of losing key Ministry of Education liaison personnel, especially if they stay only a short time in their role; a lack of opportunity for all schools to access what they need; and a lack of willingness to not only initiate worthwhile programmes, but also to work with principals to ensure that these programmes are embedded and reviewed, rather than slowly disappearing to be replaced by the next initiative. Recognising and addressing these barriers needs to be done by the Ministry of Education and principals working together

1 <https://pb4l.tki.org.nz/PB4L-Restorative-Practice>; <https://friendsresilience.org/myfriendsyouth>.

2 <https://pb4l.tki.org.nz/PB4L-Restorative-Practice/Support-material>.

References

- Gordon, L. (2011) *A Preliminary Evaluation of Restorative Practices in New Zealand Schools: ten case studies*, Network Research, https://pukekoresearch.com/pages/9/An_evaluation_of_restorative_practices_in_New_Zeal.pdf
- Haque, B. (2021) 'Getting it right: our schooling futures: stronger together: whiria ngā kura tūātitini', keynote address to the New Zealand Principals' Federation conference, Rotorua, August, https://secure.tcc.co.nz/ei/images/PFC21/Bali_Haque_Notes.pdf
- Kamp, A. (2019) 'Kāhui ako and the collaborative turn in education: emergent evidence and leadership implications', *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 24, pp.177–91, <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/nzaroe/article/view/6493>
- MacDonald, J., R. Burke, M. Berg and J. Burgon (2015) *'It's, like, trying to make us better people': my FRIENDS Youth final evaluation report*, Wellington: Ministry of Education, <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/My-FRIENDS-Youth-final-evaluation-report.pdf>
- Ministry of Education (2007) *The New Zealand Curriculum*, Wellington: Learning Media Limited, <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz>
- Ministry of Education (2010) *Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L)*
- Ministry of Education (2012) 'Positive behaviour for learning: initiatives at a glance'
- Ministry of Education (2014) *Restorative Practice Kete Book*, 1–5, Wellington: Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Education (2023) 'Communities of learning | Kāhui ako', <https://www.education.govt.nz/communities-of-learning/#:~:text=A%20Community%20of%20Learning%20%7C%20OK%20%81hui,them%20achieve%20their%20full%20potential>
- Tomorrow's School Independent Taskforce (2019) *Our Schooling Futures: stronger together | Whiria Ngā Kura Tūātitini*, Wellington: Ministry of Education, <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/assets/TSR/Tomorrows-Schools-Intro-and-Summary-ENGLISH.pdf>
- Wachtel, T. (2016) 'Defining restorative', International Institute for Restorative Practices, https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/Defining-Restorative_Nov-2016.pdf