STORMING THE WALLS: RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

This paper brings together three contextual elements of this conference:

- rethinking pedagogies and pathways
- informing approaches which widen access and success
- increasing learner engagement.

The writer was a Fulbright New Century Scholar in 2007-2008 and out of that work models for describing the process by which disengagement developed in western education systems and of the actual process of student disengagement were developed. Setting out to develop a model that brought together an analysis of the key blocks to progression into post-secondary education and training, the work soon evolved into a structural response to what was a structural problem and led to the introduction at the beginning of 2010 of New Zealand's first Tertiary High School.

Blocks in Education

The blocks to education progress generally are well-documented. For instance we know that the advantages of access to early childhood education are an influence on progress in education at all later stages. New Zealand has uneven access to early childhood education with access in parts of Counties Manukau as low as 40%. Access to two years of quality early childhood education is the first of the success dots that need to be connected for success in life.

The set of factors that either inhibit or enhance the progress of students through the K-12 education is also well documented. The enhancers include such features as:

- parental influence on educational choices

- aspirations of students
- having a foundation laid in Early Childhood Education programmes
- literacy / numeracy development
- structures of schooling systems that deliver support
- Academic preparation

The factors that inhibit progress are often the obverse face of those that lead to success and can include:

- social / Cultural factors;
- academic preparation levels;
- parental influence;
- intellectual performance and readiness;
- economic factors;
- values / social factors;
- institutional features that lead to disjunction in progression.

An International Issue

In undertaking the study the writer noted that patterns were being repeated across international boundaries; the education systems in New Zealand, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia were markedly similar. There was a reason for this – that set of education systems had similar histories and stories. Each of these systems had their historical origins in the early trend towards universal primary / basic education on the one hand and an elitist provision of higher education on the other. While everyone would have the benefit of that basic education, only a few would progress to higher education through the mechanism of the secondary school.

That set of education systems had each in their own way followed the achievement of universal basic education with a rapid drift towards universal secondary and further, followed this with a more recent emphasis on increased participation in tertiary education. They share other characteristics: they are broken up by sector structures which produce major transitions for students and they have little emphasis on check-point assessments and no focus on readiness. This all happens within a homogenous secondary curriculum at a time when the student populations have never been more diverse. More relevant to this conference has been the inexorable move away from vocational and technical education.

The impact of the demographic changes in New Zealand is obscured by the educational attainment of the new, recent, and now significant, group of Asian immigrants whose educational performance outstrips that of other migrant groups and, indeed, much of the traditional domestic community. Add to this the changes in the economy which has brought changes of which the critical one has been the shrinking of the numbers of low skilled and unskilled jobs. These were the blotting paper of educational failure and many young people who had not found much reward at school could progress to low-skilled or unskilled employment and find their feet and direction in that setting. Now, educational failure is made obvious with painful, long reaching financial and social consequences.

The focus internationally has now swung toward the transition from K-12 systems into post-secondary education and training as being a key focus in coming to terms with the growing levels, some would say crisis, of disengagement among 15 – 19 year olds. The scale of this is constant across all these systems and in New Zealand we see:

- 25,000 15- to 19-year olds Not in Employment, Education or Training ("NEET's")
- 30,000 15- to 25-year olds Not in Employment, Education or Training ("NEET's")
- Cost of this NEET group is approximately $1 billion per annum
- 20% of students have left school by the age of 16
- Maori students disengage from age 14 in significant numbers
- Pasifika have high persistence but leave with no or few qualifications

The changes that have led to this situation happened in the space of virtually one generation – 1970 to the present day. By the end of the Second World War, universal primary education had been achieved. There had always been a pipeline that involved perhaps 10% of the population who proceeded to secondary school and on to higher education. A lot of people did have some secondary schooling but this might have been one year or perhaps two years. By and large secondary schooling was not seen as critical to the futures of all young people.

With the "baby boomers" generation that came along after the Second World War, a majority of students stayed at secondary school for two years but only 10% had the full five years. This did not mean that education and training finished at the end of that relatively short time spent in secondary school - there were many other opportunities and employment was easily available since the country enjoyed virtual full employment and employers had an appetite

for on-the-job training. Professions such as teaching, nursing, business etc required much lower entry level qualifications than they do now and it was possible to set off on a career in one of the professions with two or three or four years secondary schooling. Those who did leave were able to attend night classes which provided a wide range of opportunities to get vocational qualifications. There were apprenticeships readily available.

A further point is that education had not yet produced a generation that looked down its nose at low skilled and unskilled employment. Manual labour retained a dignity. The rapid decline in the levels of engagement of young people with an education that was vocationally oriented and which led to early entry into the work force was escalated and many of these opportunities to do this were systematically stripped out of the system:

- unemployment was hardwired into the structure of the economy;
- employers in the new economic environment sought experience rather than potential;
- productivity concerns challenged "on the job training";
- professions such as teaching, nursing etc demanded increasingly higher levels of entry qualifications;
- night classes became increasingly recreational as polytechnics converted vocational
- education and training into a daylight activity;
- the Government withdrew from the economy and took with it the bulk of the apprenticeships.

This all led to an acceptance that five years of schooling was good and without a considered discussion, mass participation in tertiary became the next goal. As this developed a general academic curriculum replaced much of the vocational and technical curriculum in secondary schools (although some vocational programmes were available). It is this process which created disengagement. Actually the development of a generalised curriculum for secondary schools had been a slow and steady process over a long period of time (Kirst and Usdan, 2007).

Disengagement

This disengagement reached such levels around the English speaking world that Governments responded. In New Zealand the 2008 general election saw both major political parties enter the election with similar policies aimed at addressing the issue.
Schools Plus (Labour) and the Youth Guarantee (National) recognised that much more

flexible pathways were required and that these should include the option of continuing one's education in a setting outside a school. But the responses to this phenomenon are not easy because students who are disengaged and who add their numbers to the NEETs in the community do so by different routes and those action descigned to combat early school leaving (sometimes called "dropping out") have to recognise that there arethree kinds of disengagement:

1. *Physical disengagement* is where students are not at school at all. This can be a steady permanent state (they never come) or an intermittent state (as in persistent truancy).
2. *Virtual disengagement* sees students attending school but their disengagement incrementally increases to a point where there is little learning being achieved and they leave school with little or no qualifications.
3. *Unintended disengagement* occurs at the post-secondary level and is the result of students' believing that they had done all that they need to do ion order to succeed and have a pathway, only to discover that a set of factors (wrong course decision, inadequate preparation for that course, unable to be socialised into the institution and so on) has led to disengagement.

No one sets out to create disengagement – it is the unintended consequence of the trend towards uncritically working towards universal participation in five years of undifferentiated secondary schooling. It is a structural issue. The removal of the bridge between secondary education and the world of work (i.e. vocational tracks in secondary school), the development of the undifferentiated curriculum, the lack of connection between sectors (primary to secondary and secondary to post-secondary leading to poor levels of academic preparation) and the disconnection of the general secondary school with vocational and technical education are each a structural issue. This demands a structural response.

Tertiary High School – a New Way of Working

The writer returned to New Zealand in late 2007 with a proposal that a new structure be explored – the Tertiary High School.

In essence the idea is simple. Students identified in New Zealand Year 10 (Australia Grade 9) as likely to disengage, fail comprehensively or achieve only a few credits in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA which is the New Zealand School qualification) be considered for a four year programme in a polytechnic in which they would both finish their schooling (NCEA) <u>and</u> complete a two year career and technical qualifications – a route that would typically take five years.

Manukau Institute of Technology, working with a consortium of twenty two secondary schools identified students who were in general terms from the groups not served well by the education system – if they were likely to:

- underperforming and considered likely to fail at school;
- interested in a career path appropriate to an institute of technology;
- from the Maori Community or Pacific Islands communities;
- from a low decile school and/or a low income family;
- first-in-family to undertake tertiary education and training.

A structural solution to a structural problem would inevitably come up against structural barriers.

The structure of the New Zealand curriculum (traditional subjects) was challenged through an integrated approach in which the knowledge and skills of those subjects were embedded in the imperatives of a trades and vocational orientation. The programme is clustered into four major strands:

1. *Developing Work and Personal Skills*
   Basic skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence wrapped into a programme of developing those social skills that enhance a capacity to learn. (NCEA)

2. *Preparing for Trades and Careers*
   A real hands-on experiential introduction to the actual work of eight technical disciplines within Manukau Institute of Technology. (MIT Certificate in Tertiary Studies Level 2 and Level 3)

3. *CTE Qualifications*

> Real technical qualifications entered on meeting standard entry requirements and awarded when the requite standards applying to all students have been met.

4. *Personal Pathway Plans and Personal Development*
> Each student develops a personal pathway plan from where they are at entry through to qualifications for employment. They also plan for personal growth and development which might include ongoing contact with their school.

Venezia, Finney et.al. (2007) had put forward an agenda for change that sought to create small schools that provided multiple pathways to college success for disadvantaged youth and which aligned curriculum standards within a supportive environment.

The bringing together of the demands of a trades qualification and that of a senior secondary programme has seen innovative use made of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in ways that are new to New Zealand – typically schools have socialised the NQF into replicating the examination-based system that it replaced. Combining the secondary school with the post-secondary levels of study has been argued for by others (Carnavale, 2007a, 2007b). Hoff man and Vargas argue for integration of the high school and college (Hoffman and Vargas, 2007). The Tertiary High school set out to do just this.

There were other barriers. It was important that the students retained contact with the school they were at on enrolment in the tertiary institution. A full legal dual-enrolment was the nest way of achieving this and was necessary if funding from both secondary and tertiary streams was to be brought into the programme. This was not allowed within the law.

It made excellent sense that in reaching down to disengaging students that students who had yet to reach the legal school leaving age would be admitted into the tertiary programme that was based in a tertiary environment. This challenged the regulations that 16 year olds must be in <u>school</u> and that tertiary institutions could not be enrolled in a tertiary institution. This was not allowed within the law.

Similarly the duty of care responsibilities of a secondary school Board of Trustees was spelt out clearly and these could not be transferred to another party. This was not allowed within the law.

Finally, there was no precedent for a programme which was neither secondary nor tertiary but a blend of the two, which was integrated to such as extent that the different focal points of secondary and tertiary were impossible to disentangle. This was outside the law.

The answer to this was obvious – change the law and that is what happened in November 2009. The New Zealand Government amended the Education Act to allow the MIT Tertiary High School to work across these boundaries and therefore be freed from the constraints of territorial ownership that is generated by sectors and the restrictions on what young people can do in order to get an education. Those changes in the law have at the end of 2010 been generalised in a further amendment to the NZ Education Act to allow for a wide range of secondary-tertiary interface programmes.

Multiple Pathways – a New Way of Thinking

This also requires educators to have a more inclusive paradigm within which to offer the full range of young people now in our education systems a full range of destinations. It is simply at best a lie and at worst a self-delusion to think that the old paradigms of ownership of students because of their age, of requiring students to behave like secondary students up to a certain age, of thinking that it was a good and admirable goal for all to achieve a university degree, all of which led us to offer too many students failure and exclusion. The new paradigm will be that of multiple pathways. Continued analysis of disengagement will only at best provide a bigger picture of the situation in ever-increasing detail. It is not adequate to simply declare that the experiment with a universal and general academic secondary schooling has failed and not seek a way forward. Bill Gates (Gates, 2005) issues a call to action:

> "America's high schools are obsolete… This isn't an accident or a flaw in the system; it is the system. [The heart of the economic argument for better high schools… essentially says] "We'd better do something about these kids not getting an education… because it's hurting us. [But there's also a moral argument for better high schools, and it says:] "We'd better do something about kids not getting an education, because it's hurting them." (Gates, 2005)

In a recent book entitled *The Death of the Comprehensive High School?* Franklin & McCulloch (2007) question the extent to which existing models of secondary schooling can be expected to cater for the range of students that now enter its gates ostensibly to receive an education that prepares them for the world to follow. The collection of essays considers the issues to be international and urgent.

A further analysis (Oakes and Saunders , 2008, p.3) strikes a grim note. Evidence abounds that high schools simply don't work very well: Witness strikingly high drop-out rates, large percentages of graduates unprepared to succeed in college or career, education gaps that jeopardize African American and Latino students' life chances, and widespread student disengagement. They go on to describe secondary education in the United States as being in a state of "pervasive dysfunction." But rather than pursue the old binary argument between an "academic" or a "vocational" secondary education they report on what some call "the third way" – multiple pathways an approach whose "advocates seeks to move beyond what they see as a tired debate between academic and vocational education and the traditional tracking of students into different high school courses" (Oakes and Saunders, 2008, p5)

Much of this approach has its origins in a strand of thinking that has been much discussed but much less acted upon over the past several decades. In the United States, Monson (1997) proposed a reform strategy that closely resembles the current multiple pathways approach and again in 2003 the term became centre stage in a significant range of literature. The major refocus on Career and Technical Education (CTE) was also premised on a multiple pathways approach.

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