

## Secondary teaching, social contexts and the lingering politics of blame

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Tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora tatou katou.

I want to start with a couple of articles in the Herald this week. On Monday Chris Carter (New Zealand Minister of Education) was reported as saying how pleased he was with a professional development initiative, the Literacy Professional Development Project, and that it 'again showed the difference that effective teaching could make' (McKenzie-Minifie 2008). We might expect the Minister to be upbeat in election year but his confidence in the power of teaching is also predictable because if there is one thing the Ministry of Education, and its favourite researchers would like you to believe, it is that teachers 'make the difference'. And that is what the Minister has been told too, this is from the Ministry of Education briefing to him last year:

The strongest and most direct influence within the education system on the learning of children/students in both school and early childhood education is the effectiveness of teaching. (MOE, 2007, p.31)

Of course those crucial words 'within the education system' qualify the advice in an important way but their significance is not emphasised because the Ministry doesn't want to talk about wider social causes of underachievement such as poverty, it wants to argue that teachers make the difference and for teachers to take responsibility for student achievement.

Also in the Herald just this morning is John Tamihere, former Cabinet Minister, now heading up the Waipareira Trust. He writes about an education summit '21st Century Education - the Waipareira Way' being held this week where a key theme is the development of the Waipareira Report Card on the performance of principals, schools and teachers in Waitakere City. He says

As Kiwis we like to think we have a laidback attitude and a sense of fair play. Unfortunately, this is a sham when it comes to Maori and education. Every Maori leader and Maori parent needs to ditch the comfort zone and start thumping the school desk. Demand to know why 53 per cent of Maori boys and 44 per cent of Year 11 Maori pupils cannot pass basic literacy and numeracy tests.... Blaming parents, dysfunctional communities or poverty is all too easy and maintains the

status quo. Academics around the world call it the deficit theory. Cultural deprivation and difference have been the reason for everything from behaviour problems to poor literacy. Research shows that teachers with low expectations and negative attitudes translate into poor teaching. When teachers are confronted by their stereotypes about Maori children's abilities and taught how to lift their expectations, Maori students' social and academic outcomes improve greatly. (Tamihere 2008)

So how do you feel about that? Do you feel empowered or dismayed by the stance of the Ministry and Maori commentators that it is all up to you? Do you think policymakers and parents should be coming to 'thump the school desk'? More to the point, are you ready to suspend your critical faculties? Because while I think the Government and some researchers and Maori commentators would love you to accept the responsibility - and therefore the blame - for student underachievement, I really don't think its plausible to assert that teachers have so much power to make the difference. I think teachers can do a lot, but not as much as they are being asked to, in fact I think overemphasising the power of quality teaching has the effect of scapegoating teachers for wider problems. And so tonight I want to talk to you about why you shouldn't shoulder all the blame for poor student achievement, whether for Pakeha or for Maori and, perhaps more important, why I think it would be counterproductive if you did.

Tonight I want to look at three things

- The lingering politics of blame around the power of quality teaching in New Zealand
- Why over-emphasising the power of quality teaching is a problem
- Throwing it back – how the PPTA can challenge the current emphasis on the power of quality teaching.

### **The lingering politics of blame around the power of quality teaching in New Zealand**

By the politics of blame I mean the way that student or institutional underperformance or failure is constructed as the clear responsibility of schools and teachers. The politics of blame involve an uncompromising stance on school and student performance in which the quality of student achievement is seen as the result of school-based factors and any reference to broader socio-economic factors is ruled out as an excuse for poor performance.

To set the scene it may be helpful to cast our minds back a decade to a time when the Government's politics of blame were about as subtle as a brick:

There's a gang stalking south Auckland playgrounds. A ruthless, unfair, single-minded and tough gang. Unsuspecting principals and boards of trustees have found themselves beaten up and kicked while they're down. This gang takes no prisoners and brooks no excuse. What's more, it's legally entitled to do what it does. It's the Education Review Office - coming soon to a school near you. (MacDonald 1997)

When I first began writing about the politics of blame a decade ago they were very obvious in the work of OfSTED, the Office for Standards in Education in England and in ERO the Education Review Office here in New Zealand (Thrupp 1998). At that stage there was an emphasis on what we might call 'external' rather than 'friendly' inspection or review in these organisations. When Tony Blair's New Labour got in 1997 it had a 'tough on schools' approach, in fact it started by 'naming and shaming' what it claimed were the 18 'worst' schools in Britain. OfSTED's Chief Inspector Chris Woodhead, took up this 'tough on schools' discourse with uncommon vigor and sometimes with little real attention to inspection evidence. OfSTED inspections became part of system of dealing with failing schools which involved putting them into special measures and shutting them down or reopening them as so-called 'Fresh Start' schools if they didn't improve quickly. Woodhead also made sweeping statements about incompetent teachers - at one point he claimed that at least 15,000 British teachers were incompetent. He was also completely unwilling to acknowledge that disadvantaged social contexts were causing many of the problems that so-called failing schools were grappling with. Woodhead (2006) argued this couldn't be acknowledged because it was 'essential that OfSTED does nothing to encourage the use of pupil's backgrounds as an excuse for poor performance.'

Things weren't much better back here at the time. Woodhead's New Zealand counterpart was Judith Aitken who took much the same approach. Schools in South Auckland - Nga Tapuwae, Hillary and Tangaroa Colleges all got a good caning as the Herald put it at the time ('Office canes suburban schools' 1996) and there were also more general reports on Mangere and Otara, the Far North and the East Coast (ERO 1996, 1997, 1998) where there were seen to be lots of failing schools, but lots of low socio-economic schools in those areas too.

Like OfSTED, ERO had little time for contextual constraints on schools. Although ERO's review methodology wasn't reliable enough to be sure that some schools were more effective than others, this didn't stop it using an exemplary schools argument:

It is commonly asserted that there is a strong link between school failure and the degree of disadvantage in a socio-economic setting. There are however, some 20% of the schools in these two districts that provide an effective education for

their students. Their boards, principals and teachers have, with varying degrees of success, met the challenges of their students' backgrounds and concentrated on teaching and learning to the benefit of their students. (ERO 1996, p.4)

Not surprisingly, New Zealand teachers resisted the too-quick judgments ERO made about schools. Some protested against the assumption that their own schools were failing ('Otago schools go public to counter image' 1996), the PPTA had its own EAR-O campaign with its simple message "Please listen!" ('Please listen' 1997), and the PPTA also commissioned myself and others to review ERO (Robertson et al., 1997). But it was really political shifts that brought these politics of blame to an end. Woodhead's 'tough on teachers' persona became a liability for New Labour in an era of growing public concern about severe teacher shortages. In New Zealand after Labour got elected in 1999, Aitken's approach didn't fit so well either. A 2000 review of ERO (Rodger et al. 2000) recommended that it take a more supportive 'assess and assist' approach to schools and so EROs criticisms of schools thankfully became more muted. Not entirely of course, there was a critical report on West Coast schools in 2003 (ERO2003) and there have been others on individual schools, but EROs enthusiasm to name and shame has certainly diminished compared to the 1990s.

OfSTED and ERO's politics of blame in the 1990s drew on a body of research called School Effectiveness Research (SER, see Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). The Ministry of Education has also been interested in this kind of research and over the years has bought some of its leading lights out from the UK, people like Peter Mortimore and Louise Stoll. SER is a much-criticised literature however. This is variously because it rests on a quite partial and erroneous account of the history of educational research, because it has little theory to draw on, and because it is easily turned to the cause of neo-liberal school reform (see Morley & Rassoll 1999, Slee et al. 1998, Thrupp 2000, Thrupp et al., 2003). SER has ignored earlier findings and theory within the sociology of education about the powerful relationship between family background and student achievement. As Laurie Angus once put it, the SER response to those studies was "was simply to deny them, assume that schools do make a difference to student outcomes, and search for indicators of this difference" (Angus 1993, p. 335). Another problem with SER is it treats family background as a 'given' when of course it is not really a 'given' at all - it is socially constructed, and can be made worse or better through housing, health, employment and taxation policies, all of which will therefore affect levels of student achievement. But this failure to question underlying social inequality and the nature of policy that impacts on it leads SER to overemphasize school solutions. For school effectiveness researchers this often occurs not in the body of their analyses where they are usually quite honest about the small size of school effects versus family background effects but in the *sheer weight of discussion* given over to the effects of schools rather than broader social structures (Thrupp, 2000).

Despite these problems it was the arguments of this body of literature that OfSTED and ERO were often picking up on. For instance ERO's idea that there are exemplary schools

in low SES areas which perform considerably better than others was very popular in the 1970s in the first generation of US effective schools research. However it was not long before researchers were pointing out that the performance of students in so-called exemplary ghetto schools was still a far cry from that of students in middle class suburbs and the exemplary schools claim was shown to be overblown.

The same problematic research tradition continues to underpin today's politics of blame. For instance take the report by the Education and Science Select committee which came out earlier this year:

The 2003 PISA report said that a disadvantaged home background and parental occupation are powerful factors influencing performance. These issues are not in control of schools and the education system, and are outside the scope of our enquiry. Raising the general standard of teaching so that it is in line with the best is the quickest means of bringing about improvement in the achievement of students (Education and Science Select Committee 2008, p.15)

What we have here is the same desire to treat poverty as a 'given' as SER does. There is recognition that family background is a powerful determinant of achievement and yet the desire to focus only on the promise of improved teaching for the relatively spurious reason that it is what is seen to be within the remit of the sector.

What has also changed about today's politics of blame is that they centre less on whole-school failure and more on assertions about the power of quality teaching. A number of school effectiveness researchers have been giving renewed attention to the importance of teachers and teaching (Hill 2001, Rowe 2007, Cuttance 2000) and while this is still not the predominant emphasis of SER, it is what the Ministry is picking up on with its claims for the power of teaching. The argument then becomes that although schools may not make much difference, teachers do. But if we look at the Quality Teaching Best Evidence Synthesis (Alton-Lee 2003) and other Ministry papers on the same theme there is too much enthusiasm to stress the power of teaching. Being able to put a figure on the size of teaching effects is no doubt powerful in the policy domain, but it seems that the bigger the better from the Ministry's point of view. To give an example from the Best Evidence Synthesis:

Our best evidence is that what happens in classrooms through quality teaching and through the quality of the learning environment generated by the teacher and the students is the key variable in explaining up to 59%, or even more, of the variance in student scores (Alton-Lee 2003, p.2).

It's the 'up to 59% or even more' which needs to be noted here because if the Ministry was more even handed on this issue it would do less celebrating of research which finds very large teacher effects, and seek to provide a more balanced perspective. Even John Hattie, whose meta-analyses were criticized by the late Roy Nash for

having too much emphasis on teacher effects (Nash & Prochnow 2004), quite clearly argues that student background is much more influential:

Schools account for about 5-10% of the variance in student achievement outcomes. Schools barely make a difference to achievement.... Teachers account for about 30% of the variance. It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation....Students account for about 50% of the variance in achievement. It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable.  
(Hattie 2003)

Another source drawn on to support the power of quality teaching is analysis of international student achievement data. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows high within-school rather than between-school variance and this is interpreted by the Ministry as indicating a lot of variation in the quality of teaching. This may be what is going on, but maybe its not too. Without more detailed studies we can only guess. Harry Torrance (2006, p 833) points up the danger of reading too much into large-scale international comparisons of educational attainment:

Far from providing unequivocal evidence, large scale studies which are not also well theorised simply provide data which can be presented in any number of ways and which can be cherry picked by media and policymakers alike to support whatever is the current agenda.

More generally it seems that the Ministry has too much enthusiasm for research that supports the quality teaching agenda whereas it needs to be as demanding of that research as about other sorts of research it is not so keen on. After all, we know that it is difficult to bring about sustainable improvements in education. One of the most honest statements I've found on this is from John Gray, a school improvement researcher at Cambridge University. He says about school improvement:

First....Most of the literature simply asserts that 'improvement' has taken place.... Second, the extent to which improvement is reported to have taken place is heavily dependent on whose perceptions are given greatest weight....Third, ....progress in one area may well be at the expense of progress in others. Fourth, there is as yet little agreement about the timescales over which *major* improvements take place....Fifth, changes to school management and organisation seem easier to secure than changes to classroom practice....Sixth,... most studies to date have been rather short on evidence of *measured* improvements over time....Seventh, some researchers have argued that it is more difficult for schools serving disadvantaged areas to make progress on many of the traditional indicators...[more] evidence on this issue is needed. Finally, there is a shortage of

evidence about the extent to which schools manage to sustain improvement....(Gray, 2001, pp. 18-19, his emphasis).

To me this sort of thing indicates that if people seem to be offering remarkable gains they are probably not going to be able to deliver. Gray is talking about school improvement but the Ministry needs to be similarly searching about claims for the power of quality teaching.

The Ministry could also expect its favoured researchers to answer their academic critics instead of ignoring them, which is what has often seemed to happen in New Zealand in recent years. Some of those who do a lot of work for the Ministry seem to plough on regardless without replying to criticisms of their work from other academics and it is not a healthy situation at all. Publicly defending our work is part of being an academic - a responsibility that comes with the privilege of being able to speak out. Academic debate also adds to academic rigour because it forces people to recognize other elements of what are often very complex problems rather than becoming stuck in their own world-view.

This relates to yet another problem, that the Ministry could do more to value the 'awkward squad', those academics that are off-message, who write critically about Ministry policies or about its favoured research or are working on alternative agendas. Because it sometimes seems that Ministry would like to turn us all into teacher effectiveness researchers:

While some educational researchers are heroic in their commitment to working with the profession to make a bigger difference to all our children, many educational researchers are not engaged in the challenge of improving practice. Is there a much greater role for researchers in contributing to evidence-based development in policy and practice? Is there a role for policy in creating the conditions to promote this? (Alton Lee 2005)

I have a different understanding of the politics of education research. I think it can be too easy for academics to act as textual apologists for reform by giving governments the uncritical answers they often want. Some academics have made an industry of themselves in this way and Rob Willmott and I wrote a book about them a few years ago (Thrupp & Willmott 2003). Whereas my academic 'heroes' tend to be textual dissenters who raise more fundamental and often unpopular questions about the direction of policy and research. Researchers who do so may not be so directly 'engaged in the challenge of improving practice' as the Ministry would like but it is really important we have them. It helps keep researchers and governments honest, it contributes to social justice and it allows universities to fulfill that very important role they have as critic and conscience of society.

There are a couple of areas where I see more promise in what the Ministry is doing,

but where they could be doing more as well. If we look at the Best Evidence Synthesis programme, there is a BES on 'The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand' that came out in 2003. The Community and Family Influences report was done by Fred, Jeane and Chris Biddulph and it makes numerous useful points about the influence of family socio-economic status on student achievement. But unfortunately because it doesn't offer such obvious policy 'levers' as improving teaching and because it deals with issues beyond the sector, you don't hear as much about it as the quality teaching one (which came out at the same time). For instance this is what Adrienne Alton Lee said about the community and family influences BES last year:

Because of the importance of family and community influences on children, one of the first tranche of first iteration BESs commissioned was focussed on family and community influences on children's educational outcomes. This BES has been influential in work with other policy agencies. For example, it has strengthened the case for more priority to issues of child poverty in government policy and for a higher priority for children's untreated hearing loss which has been shown to have persisting negative impacts on children's learning, behaviour and outcomes through to adulthood (Alton Lee 2007)

What I think is telling here is how the complex and difficult issue of poverty is so quickly skipped over and the comparatively straightforward issue of hearing loss is what is highlighted. It fits with the view the Ministry is not really interested in more fundamental causes of underachievement.

Another area of promise is the emphasis on student diversity in the Ministry's account (Alton-Lee 2003). This is good because it rejects the notion of a normal group and other or minority groups of children and constitutes diversity and difference as central to educational practice (Alton-Lee 2007). However I don't see the emphasis on student diversity being the same, or in some ways as helpful, as the contextualized approach I will talk about later.

Related to diversity, I also think 'deficit discourses' amongst New Zealand teachers are not straightforward and this leads me back to Maori education. Russell Bishop's research, with colleagues, has suggested that discourses of children and their homes dominate teachers' views of why Maori students don't achieve (58% of teachers' ideas). Another 15% of teacher ideas reflect a discourse about schooling structures and systems that fail Maori students. To Bishop this is also a problem because it represents a 'non-agentic' positioning and involves 'abrogating responsibility'. The preferred discourse from Bishop's point of view is a discourse focused on relationships (27% of teachers' ideas), as this is most likely to bring about positive changes for Maori (Bishop 2005).



This view that most teachers hold deficit discourses regarding Maori students then informs the core strategy of the Te Kotahitanga project which is to turn teachers away from deficit discourses. However the same view that teachers hold deficit perspectives now seems to animate Maori commentators even where they are critical of Te Kotahitanga. I was at a Quality Public Education Coalition meeting in Auckland a few weeks ago and Te Ururoa Flavell from the Maori Party spoke. He was critical of Te Kotahitanga on the grounds that it was a bit like the Taha Maori movement of the 1980s, that idea that it represented Pakeha capture of Maori resources. Instead he was keen on what he called 'parallel development' for Maori, Kohanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa, Whare Wananga, maybe 'Iwi Education Authorities' I guess. But what he did suggest was that Te Kotahitanga had lifted the lid on teachers' deficit thinking and that it was 'a big wake up call' for teacher education.

Nevertheless it is possible to paint a more sympathetic pictures of teachers than is encouraged by the Te Kotahitanga research. Gutschlag (2007, p. 7) has drawn attention to the binary nature of Bishops categories (agentic/non-agentic) and also the way the data was coded in line with a predetermined analytic which "admits only a prescribed set of conclusions about teachers". The late Roy Nash (Nash and Prochnow 2004) pointed out that 2001 data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) included student responses intended to tap their perceptions of the school environment. These suggested primary teachers actually have rather high expectations and that they were high in low decile schools and with Maori students also. My own problem with the Te Kotahitanga research is that it doesn't provide much sense of the complexity of teachers thinking about the extent and ways in which they can make a difference to student achievement and how they may struggle over this issue.

Let me explain what I mean. Along with colleagues at Waikato, I undertook a study of Waikato primary and secondary schools in the late 1990s (Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth & Harold 2003). Most of the teachers we interviewed were adamant that teachers and principals could only be held accountable for student achievement to a limited extent because of the impact of family background. The argument that they played only a relatively minor role in the greater picture of students' lives was expressed in two main ways. First, as for Bishop, it was a matter of 'home life'. Second, it was seen as ultimately up to students whether they learned or not (what might be called the 'horses and water' discourse). In various ways these two points of view - the importance of family background and the responsibility of students themselves - were expressed time and time again, albeit with different emphases on the extent of responsibility teachers had, sometimes expressed as a percentage, sometimes as a proportion of a day and sometimes as a matter of reasonable statistical odds. But what was also indicated by many of those interviewed were complex, often contradictory, constructions of whether they could be held accountable for student achievement. Those we interviewed often seemed to have wrestled over many years with the tension between accepting their powerlessness

and doing what they could. The sort of thing I mean is indicated by this lengthy extract from one of the interviews:

I think they [teachers] can be held accountable to children's achievement in a general sense, widely, and in a particular sense if the supportive role of the parents in the home is clearly with that of the school. I think, if there is a conflict between the school and the home then you have a real problem with teacher accountability, because you've got the dominant influence on the child's life actually working against you. So that, if the child and his family are supportive of the school, that is, they are doing what the school asks; the child arrives at school ready and willing to learn; the child arrives at school well cared for and all those wonderful things, that our wonderful Prime Minister has now said what is desirable, if all those are in place, and the kid has the mechanics - the intellectual mechanics - and the physical mechanics to succeed in the school, then the teacher is accountable for what happens to the kid. If the kid fails and it's because the teacher has not taught the child, then that seems to be fair enough. So, who are we talking about now? We're talking about, what, 50% of the population? 30% of the population? If there are any factors at all which screw the relationship between the family and the home, and the kid doesn't succeed because of the lack of support and the active non-support of parents, which is probably more important; and the fact that the kids don't arrive at school, that they don't feed them, the school is really pushing up the road with that, and the teachers are going to find that difficult. The fact that children may still make progress is not the issue, but is a business accountable if the supplier, is the business accountable for the product and the service that they deliver if the reason for their failure is that, the manufacturer of the goods falls down? I don't know. Is he? You'd want your money back I suppose. But you still wouldn't say to the supplier, 'You're no good, I'm going to go to some other supplier.' What you're saying is, 'Your product's no good, have you got an alternative product that's better? We've tried this one, let's see if we can get a better one.' Is that what normal people would do? Or would they say, 'Oh, bloody hell, you gave us . . . ' because you've bought a product, they've not made the product they've simply said, 'Well these are the products. These are your choices, you can get this one, this one, this one.' Is that an analogy? If you go to a doctor, and say to a doctor, 'My kid's crook' and the doctor says, 'Well here's my cure.' That's probably nearer isn't it? You see, my old friend, he was a doctor, always said that 'Your instruments of measurement of children's progress is really the equivalent of the 17th-18th century still, you really haven't got beyond that, you're really still trying to find out how to measure children's achievement, and whether or not what you're doing is contributing to their achievement.' I think there's a great deal in that. Most children make progress at school. Most of the children we have here, who are long-stay pupils, make progress. I can produce stuff that tells me that, by the time they are in [Year 6], no matter where they started, and most of them started at five but were operating at a two to three year old level, that we've picked that

up. We've picked that up, and they are now operating at the reading level that's appropriate for their age. A few don't, but then there are usually physical disabilities, or intellectual disabilities, that go against [faster progress]. I think that's probably consistent, if we look at the long-stay kids. But that's half our clientele now. It's all these others that keep coming and going. This kid, he's been here a week, he's a total maniac. He is, he's just a maniac. Just can't keep his hands to himself. I've got some poor little sod, the school that I enrolled him from which is a Decile 1A [very low SES], laughed with glee when he went because he was so terrible . . . but he's a sad little bugger. The parents, what are they going to do? I think there's a fundamental kind of punishment involved in all that accountability crap. Why do people stay here? Why do the people stay teaching here? Is it because they can't get a job anywhere else? That's one possibility isn't it? At one level it is unrewarding, but at another level you know that what you do has an impact on the kids, and if they learn something it's because of what you've done. We have a very clear idea that we keep pumping with the kids that, when you come in the gate, we don't care what happened out there, that's your life, we can't touch that. We can touch what happens when you come in, and that's what we want to do. You come in here to learn, and we want you to learn, and we're gonna make you learn. (SMT member, Tahi)

This argument is characterised variously by what might be regarded as deficit thinking (the stereotype of the unsupportive home), by common-sense analogy (the business, the doctor), by case study (the 'maniac', the 'sad little bugger') and ultimately by fighting talk ('we're gonna make you learn'). It illustrates how the often contradictory thinking of teachers and principals in this area may be grounded in years of experiencing both the triumphs and disappointments of teaching and justifying their continuing role as educators. Such understandings and rationalisations are clearly complex and poorly served by any simple characterisation as deficit perspectives.

Let me recap. I've suggested that we are facing a continuing politics of blame, premised now less on responsibility to turn around failing schools but on the power of quality teaching to overcome underachievement by students. I've suggested there are problems with the research the Ministry uses to assert its claims about quality teaching and the way the Ministry chooses to draw on that research. I've also suggested teachers may often have complex discourses of struggle rather than that simple deficit perspectives. The question I want to turn to now is whether over-emphasising the power of quality teaching is really a problem? After all, secondary teachers work with teenagers and it could be argued that being blamed for problems that are not your fault is part and parcel of working with teenagers! And also if teaching is seen as so powerful, perhaps this can be a good argument to use for bargaining for better pay and conditions.

### **Why over-emphasising the power of quality teaching is a problem**

There are problems with too much emphasis on the power of quality teaching. It fails to recognize teacher struggles, it distracts from addressing child poverty, and it distracts from a contextualization agenda that offers more than the quality teaching agenda. There are also new accountabilities which are raising the stakes around quality teaching and over-emphasising the power of quality teaching also risks opening up (false) salvation discourses if the quality teaching agenda fails to deliver.

First, recognising teacher struggles. The lengthy extract above shows just how futile it may be to try and stop teachers from thinking about socio-economic influences on teaching as the quality teaching agenda and teacher deficit arguments effectively try to do. How are teachers ever going to turn off that struggle, that deliberation, that wanting to make sense of the world? When we ask teachers not to think about wider structural reasons for underachievement, they will certainly still think about those things but keep their views to themselves. I think we are much better to have that thinking out in the open and have some informed understandings circulating rather than silence teachers for fear of promoting some notion of deficit thinking which is probably too simplistic anyway.

Let also face it, there are wider issues to think about than the quality of teaching. Blaming teachers for underachievement distracts from addressing the effects of child poverty in New Zealand. I'm on the executive of the Child Poverty Action Group and shortly we will launch a new report called 'Left Behind: How social and income inequalities damage New Zealand children' (St John & Wynd, 2008). Some of the points that will make include:

- In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand had the fastest growth in income and wealth inequality in the OECD
- Despite the better economy and significant increase in paid employment, between 2000 and 2004 the proportion of all children in severe and significant hardship increased by a third, to 26 percent.
- In 2004, there were about 185,000 children in benefit families in some degree of hardship, with 150,000 of them in significant or severe hardship.
- Using the 60% of median income line the New Zealand child poverty rate is among the worst in the OECD.
- Working for Families represents a significant redistribution of money in favour of low- and middle-income working families with children, and has reduced child poverty in many of these families.
- For families supported by benefits, increased family assistance has been offset by a range of benefit cuts, leaving many simply "no worse off" than they were before these changes.
- New Zealand children have higher rates of preventable illness and deaths from injuries than children in almost any other OECD country. They have comparatively high infant mortality rates and low immunisation rates

- The single most important determinant of health is income. A child growing up in poverty is three times more likely to be sick than a child growing up in a higher-income household.
- Transience is a significant problem for the many thousands of low-income families in private rental accommodation, and has high costs for children's socialisation, education and health.

All of this suggests we need to be sure that teachers are not being asked to address issues better addressed by wider government policy. It is ironic that the Ministry of Education bang on about the importance of quality teaching when just a couple of streets away in Wellington the Ministry of Social Development are putting out reports which show that by the Government's own analyses the poor are getting poorer and poorer in New Zealand (e.g. Jensen et al. 2006, Ministry of Social Development 2007). As a result many New Zealand schools will be swimming against the tide and yet the Ministry of Education doesn't want to acknowledge this. The danger becomes that school-based solutions are overplayed, turned from what Jean Anyon has called 'small victories', into what she calls 'large victories' which are seen to provide the solution to educational and social inequalities (Anyon 1997). And that's the dangerous terrain that I think the Ministry flirts with. They say they are not looking for a silver bullet but its hugely tempting to try to find one.

The teacher quality agenda also distracts from what Ruth Lupton and I have been calling the contextualisation agenda for educational research, policy and practice (Thrupp & Lupton 2006, Lupton & Thrupp 2007, Thrupp, Lupton & Brown 2007). This would involve starting with not just a view that students come from diverse backgrounds but an analysis of the local social and political contexts of schools, including differences in pupil intake characteristics (class, ethnicity, turbulence, proportion of pupils from refugee families or with special needs) and other school and area characteristics (local labour market, urban/rural location, market position of the school compared to surrounding schools). Local is being used broadly here: the social and political features of regions, areas, neighbourhoods and school catchments could all be relevant. By highlighting the significance of these features contextualised discussions can create accounts which are much less 'neutral' and politically 'naïve' and hence allow for contextualised policy responses that might better meet the needs of specific schools and teachers. In part these will involve a fairer distribution of resources to allow for the different organisational designs required in different school contexts, reflecting the fact that the unpredictability of the school day in some schools is, in a sense, entirely predictable given their contexts.

The contextualisation agenda would also support contextualised models of practice. It is clear that deliberate adaptations are made by teachers and school leaders in order to deal with the social, political and market contexts of their schools. For instance Ruth Lupton's (2004) study of the differences between high poverty schools

in England showed adaptations used by schools extending to almost every aspect of organisation: lesson lengths, class sizes, ability groupings, additional learning support, behaviour and attendance management, pastoral care, extra-curricular activities and so on. However, since school and teacher effectiveness research has typically been so generic in its approach, these contextualised examples remain marginalized. It remains difficult to work out which practices would be most appropriate in schools in particular kinds of settings. A better understanding of local context would allow those providing policy and advice to schools to design interventions which have a better chance of fitting and therefore succeeding within the school environments they are intended for and therefore improving the life-chances of students.

A further reason overemphasis on the power of quality teaching is a problem is that there may be some new high stakes accountabilities in this area. I was pleased to work with PPTA and NZEI on the possibility of banks of specified standards being laid down by the New Zealand Teachers Council (Thrupp 2006) and I'm pleased the new graduating standards turned out to be more generic. However the Education and Science Select committee report mentioned earlier also recommends that "[t]eachers should be awarded fully registration after two years employment only if they have demonstrated that they are able to raise consistently the achievement of their students" (Education and Science Select Committee 2008, pp.27-28) . So that's high stakes and if it happens its possible that we will see similar target-setting around student achievement for experienced teachers and maybe performance-related pay also. I think these kinds of policies are counterproductive, they become the tail that wags the dog, they make teachers anxious and concerned to jump through the required hoops rather than encouraging authentic practice and, most important in terms of the politics of blame, they don't acknowledge that it is much easier to demonstrate achievement in some contexts than others.

Finally, overemphasis on the power of quality teaching is a problem is that it could easily lead to discourses of (false) salvation if policymakers become frustrated that teachers are not delivering. For instance even if what is being asked of teachers is unrealistic, if they are seen to have failed to address underachievement, it becomes easier to mount arguments for more accountabilities, performance pay, bringing in the private sector and so on. And so the key is for teachers to refuse to accept too much responsibility for student achievement in the first place.

### **Throwing it back - how the PPTA can challenge the politics of blame around quality teaching.**

How can the PPTA best respond to the politics of blame? I think it was useful to commission the recent critique of Te Kotahitanga (Openshaw 2007) and it may be valuable to get a group together to cast a critical eye over the Ministry's quality

teaching agenda more generally. It is important that group includes a highly regarded educational statistician.

Something the membership can do is to take every opportunity to resist the view that quality teaching holds all the answers. I think the message to policymakers and the public at the moment should be 'yes of course we can improve our practice and make a difference to the achievement of young people and to their lives, but don't look to us to solve all the problems of student underachievement because its not fair on us and you are going to be sorely disappointed too'.

Finally I would say to those of you in schools where the social context isn't so pressing, don't let your colleagues down by downplaying the contextual disadvantages faced by many schools. What teachers and principals in high decile schools can do is be honest in their public statements about the way in which their schools gain advantage from their high socio-economic intakes. It is always refreshing to hear the principals of middle class schools publicly comment, as they occasionally do, that 'yes, our students did do well in such and such an exam/scholarship/competition but you would expect that with our intake.' In this way teachers and school leaders at advantaged schools can refuse to buy into the view that their colleagues in less popular schools are performing badly. And yes I hear you saying you have problems too but what I have come to realize is that education is a bottomless pit of challenges/problems and those faced by teachers in higher decile schools tend to fill their horizons and use up their capacity even if they are not of the same order as those in low SES schools. So while you do have problems - both the same poverty related problems as low SES schools but less intense, and problems related more to the middle class aspects of your intakes, I think this partly reflects the fact that there is more capacity to acknowledge and pick up problems that those at lower SES schools would struggle to get to.

I want to finish with a quote from John Dewey which I often use because I think partly what I have been talking about tonight is resisting being positioned as not wanting the best for all students when we raise our reservations about the quality teaching agenda and about teacher deficit arguments. Because certainly Dewey's aspiration is my aspiration and I'm sure it is your aspiration too. He said

'[W]hat the best and wisest parent wants for his [sic] own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely: acted upon, it destroys our democracy' (Dewey 1902: 3).

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora tatou katoa.

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