

**“We all live under the same sky!”**

*A report to the Woolf Fisher Trust following one  
principal's experience as  
a Woolf Fisher Fellow in 2005*

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## Summary

This report outlines the findings of a principal fortunate enough to undertake a Woolf Fisher Fellowship for three months in 2005.

The study involved visits to schools and universities in Hong Kong, Scotland, England, Canada and the USA. A highlight of these visits was a summer institute leadership programme at Harvard University. Travel time was also set aside for personal growth through visits to new and different countries in the Mediterranean region.

The study topics were:

- (a) international trends in school management, and,
- (b) the educational achievement of minority groups.

## Findings:

- Public education is changing under the influence of privatisation
- Teachers are experiencing increasing accountability measures that are making their work more and more complex
- The role of school principals has never been more important but the myriad of expectations they face is causing difficulties
- Student underachievement is a constant concern in a complex education system that is not structured to deliver total equality of education outcomes.

Key influences on education are seen as:

- The increasing cost of education
- The conflict between increasing school autonomy and increasing school accountability
- The lack of recognition of the complexity of education.

The report suggests that New Zealand needs to:

- Recognise the key role of principals
- Publicly recognise the very good international reputation of New Zealand teachers
- Focus principal professional development programmes on leadership
- Continue to work for reduced student underachievement.

The report concludes with personal memories of a time of great professional and personal growth. The Woolf Fisher Trust is thanked and acknowledged for having the foresight to structure this professional opportunity in such a positive fashion.

## **Introduction**

The opportunity presented by the Woolf Fisher Trust Fellowship was taken up between April and July 2005. This time frame allowed for twelve weeks of international travel, study and personal reflection.

The decision of where to go was made with several factors in mind. Firstly the choice of study topics required visits to countries where most could be learned. Secondly it was thought that personal contacts in overseas schools, universities and administration systems would be useful in “opening doors”. This did indeed prove to be the case. Thirdly a decision was made to spend some time in new and different circumstances and surroundings. It was anticipated that this would provide for the widening of personal growth and reflection. This also proved to be true.

## **Study topics**

Two issues were of personal interest and considered to be relevant to the current New Zealand educational scene.

### **1. International trends in school management.**

The introduction of school self-management is a worldwide process that has escalated over the last twenty-five years. New Zealand has taken a lead in this regard and it is generally accepted that New Zealand schools have a higher degree of self-management than any other international education system.

The delegation of school management to local school communities also changed the focus of education leadership. As previous educational authorities became redundant, education leadership also became school based.

Of course it is very difficult for a state to give up control of the state’s own education system. Hence the devolved school management system that became known in New Zealand as “Tomorrow’s Schools” became, and remains, extremely problematic. Time has shown that the more schools become self-managing the more the state requires systems of accountability to ensure state objectives are met, state assets are protected and fiscal risk is reduced.

School self-management has imparted greatly on those who work in schools and those community members charged with responsibility for school success. However the impact was greater on the school principal who became responsible for meeting state demands and community aspirations while at the same time ensuring that school management systems operated successfully and education leadership remains intact. Given this extremely interesting and challenging environment an international evaluation of school management systems seemed a logical study topic. It was also an advantage that this issue fitted well with the planned programme of study to be undertaken at a summer institute course at Harvard University.

## **2. Educational underachievement of minority groups.**

National statistics in New Zealand illustrate an achievement gap between Maori and non-Maori and between Pasifika students and others. All data shows that Maori and Pasifika students appear to underachieve. Hence the current Government has an emphasis through resource allocation, prioritising and regulation on improving the achievement of both these groups. The Government has clearly charged schools with the responsibility to reduce these disparities.

However, the function is more difficult than the intent. Debate abounds as to the cause of underachievement of particular groups and the best process for elimination of this. Regardless of the arguments, however, schools are seen as having to deal with the issue and again the school principal is at the forefront of these school interventions. Hence this was seen as an interesting issue to be discussed with colleagues on an international level.

### **Programme**

It was decided to investigate the study topics on two levels. Firstly visits would be arranged to schools where discussions could take place principal to principal. Secondly it was important that university contacts be arranged where a more theoretical perspective could be teased out.

With the above factors in mind a study itinerary was arranged to include visits to Hong Kong, Aberdeen in Scotland, London, Toronto, New York, Providence in Rhode Island and Boston where the Harvard University summer institute programme was based.

A programme of visits to schools and universities was established with the emphasis on the quality time rather than fleeting visits. It was thought this would give time to develop relationships, extend visits and gather a variety of opinions. It also allowed time to experience local life and for personal contemplation and reflection. This did prove to be very useful. The acknowledgement page of this report lists the professionals who willingly contributed their time and expertise. Their support is much appreciated.

An important part of the Woolf Fisher Fellowship is the opportunity for personal growth through a range of varying experiences not normally or easily undertaken. To this end travel was organised to allow for short visits to a number of Mediterranean countries and an extended time in Egypt. Several states in America were also added to the itinerary to allow for personal sightseeing.

### **General findings:**

If there is one thing that can be said about the business of education and schooling it is that it has become extremely complex. If there is one thing I have learned from many years of practice, academic study and personal reflection it is that no matter what point of view is taken on education everyone is at least partly correct. My experiences highlighted once again the multitude of philosophies, aspirations and dreams inherent in the process known as education.

Hence the findings below are offered as personal reflections. I have attempted to draw on key factors and specific experiences to make useful generalisations.

Of course a description of what was found, albeit from a New Zealand perspective, is in itself only somewhat useful. This report attempts to go further and offer reasons why certain circumstances appear to have developed. I have also drawn conclusions as to what actions might be taken in New Zealand to accentuate the positive and reduce the negative in overseas systems.

Four key findings are elaborated on. These are:

- the changing face of public education
- the increasing difficulties faced by teachers in their daily work
- the reality of principalship in modern schooling, and
- the underachievement of minority groups.

### **1. The changing face of public education.**

It is not an exaggeration to state that traditional public education is undergoing radical change especially in the United Kingdom. This was seen to be happening in a number of ways:

#### (a) The growth of private schooling.

There appears to be an increasing desire by parents, especially middle class parents who can afford to do so, to move their children into private schools. Public schools in poorer areas especially have much less appeal than private schools. In public schools class sizes were larger, resources were fewer and staff retention was a common problem.

It was suggested by university based critics that the schooling system in England especially simply reflects a society that holds “individualism” as paramount and that *“neo-liberalism [in education] is an extension of capitalism based on market forces.”*<sup>1</sup>. Whatever the reason it is clear there is much concern, if not downright fear, among middle class parents that the public school system will fail their children and that private schooling offers a much more attractive alternative path to quality higher education.

#### (b) The increase in corporate money into public schooling:

Schools are developing partnerships with private companies to gain access to extra school resources and equipment. There are discussions regarding systems for private companies to invest in state schools. The advantages are a reduced need for state funding, more business like management of schools and more accountability from schools and teachers to meet the requirements of parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Susan Robertson, Bristol University

(c) “Contestable funding” for schools to specialise.

Secondary schools are able to apply for funding to develop individual programmes and in particular school emphasis. This allows for school specialisation and is seen as increasing options for parents and enhancing parental choice. What this also does is increase competition between schools and between students. Access to schooling can become problematic if school places are limited and/or travel to the desired schools is practical or not.

(d) The rise of private consultants.

Private contractors are increasingly involved in school inspections, teacher professional development programmes, school advice programmes and education policy development. Interestingly the Harvard University summer institute programme also used a number of consultants from private organisations to teach numerous aspects of the course.

## **2. The increasing difficulties faced by teachers.**

There appears to be a worldwide trend for teachers to be more accountable for the programmes they teach. The expectation on schools to deal with a seemingly endless array of student needs is also impacting heavily on the work teachers do.

One of the more controversial measures used to increase teacher accountability is through the use of a national testing programme and the public presentation of the test results that compares schools and ranks them according to their success in having students pass the tests.

However, the use of national testing data to assess schools and teachers in this fashion can be counter productive. On one hand it has focussed teachers on Government priorities and arguably raised standards in those areas. On the other hand national testing is blamed for limiting the curriculum and putting teachers under stress as they work to help their pupils compete on an uneven social “playing field”.

It is clear that “data driven teaching” is being seen as a major pathway to improved learning by education authorities but the danger on over emphasising teacher responsibility for student success or failure is ever present. The proliferation of student

data was generally seen as positive by principals in the United States. However, it was interesting to hear that the failure of data to illustrate success was seen by those same principals as an argument for the collection of yet more data rather than a reflection on what action was needed to improve the data already received.

The stress of teachers in many schools created difficulties for those charged with teacher recruitment, teacher retention and teacher quality. Interestingly, in many London schools the employment of New Zealand teachers was common and there is no doubt that New Zealand teachers are generally held in very high regard.

### **3. The role of school principals.**

Many factors have impacted on the work of principals (headteachers) in recent years. School self-management has given principals responsibility for property, staff recruitment and retention, finance, community liaison, student welfare, health and safety as well as student learning. Schools have arguably become caught between mandated Government policies and requirements on one hand and local community needs and aspirations on the other. In the middle of this is the school principal charged with being school manager, school leader and public relations manager.

Arguably the principals' task is becoming impossible. One of the most concerning aspects of this study was the degree to which principals felt under siege. In all the countries visited principals expressed concern at how difficult their task had become and how hard they had to work to meet the needs of authorities, their communities and above all their students. Sadly they felt "taken away" from their core business of teaching and learning as they grappled with a vast array of expectations.

The result was that principals survived by choosing to do what they could and by trying to learn to live with that. They clearly gained much satisfaction from the success of their students and gained pride in many aspects of their work. However, the pressure to achieve more was relentless.

This is an important issue that appears common to some degree worldwide. The question of principal responsibility and accountability needs addressing otherwise stress,

overload, inefficiency, burnout, illness and early losses to the system will continue to limit the important contribution principals have to offer.

#### **4. Dealing with student underachievement.**

The issue of student underachievement was seen as ever present. This is because underachievement is a relative term and historically some groups have always been able to be identified as underachieving. Further more it could be argued that differentiated student achievement is an inevitable outcome of a competitive education system that produces winners and losers. Competitive systems set someone up to fail and sadly groups at high risk of failure tend to feel alienated and opt out of the system thus reinforcing the failure.

The official response to underachievement in England is for the authorities to hold schools and teachers accountable, to encourage parents to consider private education and to increase private funding to state education. In extreme cases schools are put into “special measures” and in some circumstances principals have been dismissed and schools closed. By New Zealand standards these are dire measures indeed.

#### **Key influences on education.**

As mentioned earlier it is relatively easy to describe “what is”. Analysing why a situation is the way it is is somewhat more difficult. However, such a task is necessary if the findings are to be useful in a New Zealand context.

On reflection there appears to be three factors that impact on education as it is currently delivered to students.

#### **1. The cost of education and the question of who pays.**

This important issue is causing debate worldwide and the “correct” or “best” answer largely depends on one’s philosophical position on a number of issues. Clearly education is an expensive business and it is also a “bottomless pit” in that no matter how much money one spends it is always possible to “improve delivery” by spending more. Entwined with this is the issue of where the money should come from. This in turn raises the question as to whether education is a public good or an individual asset. If it is the former then the public should pay via a national taxation system and thus provide

a publicly funded, universally equitable system. However, the education of an individual could be considered an asset of that individual. If so then it would be reasonable to assume that the individual be responsible for some, if not all, of that cost.

In all systems there is a mixture of publicly funded and personal investment and the balance depends on the political climate of the time and place. Suffice to say that in England particularly the trend is towards greater cost to the individual as evidenced by the growing attractiveness of private schools and the greater involvement of private money into public schools. Of course, how far this develops will depend on the solutions to problems of universal access and the inability of some groups to be able or willing, to meet the personal costs of their schooling.

While these issues are not unknown in New Zealand, fortunately we have been spared the extremes of the problem thus far.

## **2. School autonomy versus school accountability.**

The worldwide trend to increase school self-management and the corresponding move to devolve school decisions to the local level has produced an interesting dilemma and nowhere is this more obvious than in Britain.

All educationalists spoken with during this study trip agreed that increasing school self-management is inevitable. However, it seems very unlikely that any government could or would completely privatise the state education system. A universal system of schooling is too influential a mechanism for the state to give away complete control. Couple this with the fact that the state has a large fiscal involvement and it becomes obvious that the state will necessarily retain a substantial measure of control. In short the state will always require a measure of control of its own school system.

Herein lies the dilemma. The more schools become self-managing the more the state must hold schools accountable. The more schools are accountable to the state the less autonomy they actually have.

This seems one of the key reasons why school systems become overburdened with expectations to deliver learning success on one hand and wide reaching accountability

demands on the other. The result is that the self-managing school can become the constantly responding school as schools simultaneously deal with increasing autonomy and increasing accountability. The resulting stress on the professionals involved can be quite alarming.

### **3. The complexity of education is underrated.**

The days when children went to school to simply learn the “basics” have understandably long vanished. School organisation and management have become very complex in the face of expanding demands from governments, communities, parents, learners and the profession itself. Furthermore, teaching and learning have always been very complex and teaching itself has always been as much an art as a measurable skill.

School systems are thus incredibly complex. One of the outcomes of this is that school accountability measures that are theoretically desirable become inadequate in practice. For example, national testing programmes certainly focus teaching on curriculum areas that are to be tested but understandably, given the high stakes way the results are used to compare schools, what gets tested gets taught. However, teachers know that education is far greater than the content of the tested curriculum. Arguably the complexity of the system ensures that accountability systems are at best limited and, at worst, barriers to overall progress.

This complexity also impacts on schooling improvement measures. Because the system is very large and complex comprehensive solutions to problems of school improvement are difficult to determine let alone put into action. Consequently relatively simple solutions are selected to try and solve what are deceptively large educational problems. Susan Robertson summed this up thus; “*The little story in the big narrative can become the big story, or the only story, in the narrative.*” Unfortunately this difficulty can be apparent at government level where politically driven somewhat simplistic solutions become mandated policy yet fail to meet the expected outcome.

#### **What to do in New Zealand.**

If what happens overseas is to be useful in our New Zealand setting then one is forced to consider what the above findings might mean for this country. While New Zealand has not got the extremes, or the excesses evident in Britain or the United States of

America, we are part of the world scene and it is important to learn from the situation of others.

The following suggestions are given as steps for those involved in education in New Zealand to consider:

1. The role of school principals is a key factor in school success.

This position is not new and is already widely accepted. However, this report suggests that although the role of principals is crucial the opportunity for principals to successfully, and continually carry out their task to the highest level, is fraught with difficulty. The following suggestions are made for principals to consider if they are to avoid the overload problems observed overseas.

- (a) Principals need to work collectively, to be united and speak out as a group when issues that have a negative effect on their students arise. Collective action also involves acting in a professional manner and supporting colleagues.
- (b) Principals need to act individually and ensure they do their job to the highest professional standard. Good principals running good schools are the best possible advertisement for our education system. Good schools are crucially important because at the end of the day schools are where the children are.

2. The good work of New Zealand teachers needs to be recognised publicly and acknowledged widely. New Zealand schools are world leaders in many fields but unfortunately negative publicity from the media, from politicians and from everyone with a barrow to push overwhelms positive publicity. One could almost feel that the New Zealand education system is more highly regarded overseas than it is in New Zealand. The challenge on us all is to turn this around.

3. Principals' professional development programmes need to emphasise educational leadership.

Good school management is crucial but if our schools are to continue to lead the world in literacy, numeracy and child-centred teaching then continued educational leadership is required. Programmes are already under way in New Zealand but more comprehensive work needs to be done. Such a task is not easy because as Michael Cowie from Aberdeen University pointed out: *"People can have unrealistic expectations about principalship preparation programmes. What we do is largely an act of faith."*

However, what we do know is that school self-management will no doubt increase and that school principals will require more than extra accountability. A realistic level of autonomy and more involvement in policy consultation are required if the education is to continue to improve.

#### 4. Student underachievement must be challenged.

The point was made earlier that differentiated achievement is inevitable, as no education system has ever delivered total equality of outcomes. However, this is not to say the fight to remove underachievement should not be taken up whenever it appears. Student underachievement is not a simple issue, however, and, as has been suggested, all too often complex problems have been addressed by all too simple a solution.

I suggest that the key to success at school for all students is personal relevance. Children need to connect with adults at school and feel that “their school” is “their place”. This brings a degree of confidence and commitment and self esteem. And, as research has shown, self-esteem is very important in connecting with school and being a successful learner.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore when working with underachieving minority groups I believe we should concentrate on what makes different groups similar. Clearly, we need to recognise differences in other ethnicities, religions and cultures but we should acknowledge the difference and work to unite through shared learning success.

#### **Conclusion.**

The first point to make in this conclusion is to acknowledge the value of sabbaticals for teachers and principals. To this end I again acknowledge the Woolf Fisher Trust for firstly providing this opportunity and secondly for organising it in the way that it is. The leave time and the travel grants are generous and the recognition of the Fellow's partner is a unique and extremely valued one.

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<sup>2</sup> Ma Xin (2003) Sense of Belonging to School: Can Schools Make a Difference? The Journal of Educational Research (96) 6 340 – 350.

The ability to arrange a personal study programme supported by a leadership development programme at Harvard is a very good one and provides a structure for researching, sharing ideas and personal reflection. Interestingly the Harvard principals' programme was one of the most practical development programmes I have undertaken. While there were a number of intellectually challenging sessions I have found the presentations that focussed on principalship practice to be the ones that changed my behaviour back in school.

The second major point to make in this conclusion is to acknowledge and stress the importance of time for personal reflection and professional growth. It is very difficult to know what was more valuable; the "work days" in schools and universities or the "tourist days" in new and thought provoking surroundings. Clearly the Woolf Fisher Trust is to be congratulated for having the foresight and wisdom to structure the fellowship in the manner it has.

### **Three special memories.**

Firstly I was reminded once again of the quality of New Zealand teachers and the very good schools we have in this country. While it is our nature to want to improve it is also valuable to pause and appreciate what we have.

Secondly I was reminded of the similarities and commonality of children, teachers and principals across the world. I also experienced a special bond among principals. There is a definite feeling of appreciation for fellow professionals who face common challenges and who strive to reach remarkably common goals regardless of where they may work or how different their physical surroundings might be.

Thirdly I was struck by the commonality of humanity. From the banks of the Nile River to the streets of New York, from the high-rise buildings of Hong Kong to the Highlands of Scotland people follow very similar hopes, dreams and aspirations. In a world where human differences confront us daily in the media it was timely for me to relearn that what unites us as people is more important than what makes us different. When I commented to Cheuk Kuen Lui, a fellow principal in Hong Kong that the issues he faced were very similar to mine in New Zealand he laughed and replied: "*Of course – we all live under the same sky.*" Indeed we do.