

Denise's Conference Speech 2015

I think '*seeing education through different lenses*' is an inspired theme for our conference and as I prepared for this speech, I decided to continue the theme and look at education through the 'big picture' lens.

I sifted through recent topics and felt spoilt for choice! In recent years there have been so many initiatives, so many issues.

From 2008 and the drive to join the Global Education Reform Movement we have had national standards and the Progress & Consistency Tool, we have flirted with performance pay, with league tables and we've got Better Public Service Targets. We have had amendments to the Education Act to allow for charter schools, and to completely transform our Teachers Council to EDUCANZ. We have had special education reviews, property debates, resourcing reviews, health and safety, vulnerable children's Act and of course the heavily resourced Investing in Educational Success initiative. Finally, let's never forget the most notorious of all system changes – the payroll change to Novopay!

Listing all these reforms, initiatives and system changes got me reflecting on the bigger picture. How do all of these fit into an overarching national direction? Do we even have a shared national vision for education? And whilst my mind went in search of that elusive vision, I came across a quote from Nelson Mandela which said 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'

That's a powerful statement. Education clearly needs a far-reaching plan.

So I asked an even deeper question, 'How do all those initiatives and changes fit the fundamental purpose of education?' And come to think of it, what is the purpose of education today?

The more I read and reflected, the more I realised we have lost sight of the underpinnings of education and why we teach what we teach

So let's pause and think about that for a moment. Let's think about the purpose of education. To do that, I'm going to take us back to a time when things were less complicated. I'm taking us back to the late 19th century.

The industrial revolution created a very clear picture for us and defined a simple purpose for education. The newly mechanised world of production and manufacturing would need tens of thousands of workers to make the wheels of industry turn. We needed an education system that would prepare the masses to be work-ready for the factories and the fields. And by 1877 we had legislated for free secular and compulsory education.

Mass education was about teaching the basics of reading writing and arithmetic, and socialising children into the ways of work and social conformity. These were the simple purposes of education. The basic 3Rs, as they were affectionately termed, alongside values including punctuality, obedience, knowing one's place, and respect for authority. These were the essential skills and values considered necessary for strengthening the economy in an industrialised and civilised society.

We see evidence of the system reinforcing these skills through the relentless rote learning, the disciplined flag pole rituals, the school clock towers, the intolerance of difference and the strict disciplinary codes of the day, designed to ensure conformity. There would be no invasion of creativity into this system! The educational

content was standard right across the board so in deference to accountability, standard tests and exams could be applied to check how successfully the system was performing. And so New Zealand's education system obediently trudged its way through the decades towards the post-industrial era.

Our society has kept on evolving and today we are immersed in the information age. We prepare our children to live in a global environment, in which they might change their working careers several times. It is an era driven by technological change, by radical environmental change and by societal change. So what is the purpose of education now?

Most of us would say that at one level the purpose of education is skills, knowledge and values. We might also agree that education remains a process of socialisation or learning about traditions, customs and expected social behaviour. Some would go further and say that the purpose of education is to empower children to become life-long learners and to manage their own learning so that they can adapt to the changes they will face in their future twenty-first century (working lives). Technology is rapidly changing the landscape of traditional career roles and future work will

become more and more dependent on new skills, on creativity, problem solving and critical thinking. This would call for a more personalised approach to teaching and learning.

So if we were to adopt these three factors, skill acquisition, socialisation and empowerment as the purpose of education, we would not be adopting education policies that led to predictable, risk free measures for education. We would not be adopting policies like national standards or developing tools like PaCT. These are designed to reduce personalisation and subjectivity as much as possible. We would not be obsessed with ranking our schools or examining international league tables like the OECD's TIMMS and PERLS and PISA and grieving every time our country's ranking dropped a position.

Empowering children to control their own learning is the ultimate in personalisation of learning. It's a risky business. Children are taking charge, exploring their own questions and creating their own learning. Such a learning process is not easily assessed by standardised measures. So already we have a serious disconnect if we agree that empowerment of children over their own learning is a purpose of education.

So what if we asked employers what they think is the purpose of education? A recent survey of employers published in 'The Economist' ranked problem solving, team work, communication, critical thinking and creativity as the top five skills they are looking for in an employee today and ranked literacy seventh and numeracy tenth.

If we go with the employers, then we would seek a holistic approach to education which would take into account the diverse talents and diverse learning pathways of all our children. Our curriculum approach would be balanced. The arts and sciences would sit comfortably alongside each other; the physical, the dramatic, the musical and the values education would take equal emphasis with the reading, the writing and the mathematics. The learning would be personalised and it would be creative.

Finally, we could turn to the educational experts for their views on the purpose of education. Sir Ken Robinson is one of the world's most influential voices in education today and this is what he would say *'the aims of education are to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens.'* In his view we must immediately divert our attention from testing and standardisation and

revolutionise our education systems to focus on what he sees are the four basic purposes of education: the personal, cultural, social and economic.

By personal, he means that we are not dealing with homogeneity. Each child has different capacities, interests and passions and it is the teacher's job to connect each one of them with their own sense of possibility. In other words children should not be treated the same. In Robinson's view, they need a personalised curriculum.

His second purpose is cultural. We live in communities and Robinson says, must learn to relate to a diverse mix of people and express our interconnectedness especially through music and the arts. Cultural diversity enriches communities when people can share their cultures. We are a country that is becoming more multi-cultural by the day. If we agree with Robinson, then we will want to teach tolerance and cultural respect because without careful guidance diversity can equally breed hatred and hostility. According to Robinson, cultural respect is best achieved through a broad-based rich curriculum.

Social purpose of education is cultivating in children, a sense of active citizenship so that they can fully participate in a democratic society. Democratic rights have been hard won by courageous men and women throughout history. It is important that children understand this, and respect and actively apply their democratic rights for the benefit of the whole society. In Robinson's view, the ballot box is democracy's sharpest tool

Finally he talks about the economic purpose of education. Governments invest heavily in education and have always expected that there will be an economic return. What sort of education would we need for this to happen? Robinson draws on the broad curriculum approach counting global awareness, financial and business and entrepreneurial , literacy, civic and health literacy and environmental literacy. He adds communication, critical thinking, problem solving, adaptability and self-direction to the mix alongside social and cross-cultural skills, leadership and responsibility. For national and global prosperity in the twenty-first century, these are the skills required, he says.

I believe, that until we reach an agreed sense of the purpose for education in New Zealand today, we will continue to be overwhelmed and bewildered by myriad policy initiatives none of which fit together. As I stare down the 'big picture' lens, I see a vacuum. We need to fill that vacuum. We need to set our moral compass and launch a public debate on the purpose of education so that we can test initiatives rationally and adopt those that fit. Then and only then will we have an education system 'TRULY FIT FOR PURPOSE'

Denise Torrey
President