

Our Country: Our Choice. Harvey McQueen

Our Country: Our Choice Education Harvey McQueen* Education is the human attempt to put systems and resources into place to assist learning - in some societies, to control it. Learning is something we all do. Learning has always been lifelong, and increasingly education is seen as such. Once the family was the chief educative source. Last century, the nation-state took over this role. Now education is available in new interactive ways in a global multi-media world. Virtual reality and artificial intelligence are just around the corner. To predict 2020 one needs to explore the past. What education system would one design if one had a blank slate - no, a clear whiteboard; no, not even that, an interactive computer linked to Email? Education follows wider societal forces and trends. A minor example: until recently our school terms were based upon the lactation cycle of the cow. At the macro-level, from the Renaissance, that age of classic individualism, students sat at the feet of, or learned their trade from, the master - the apprentice model. After the Industrial Revolution, a factory-style processing of knowledge and of pupils developed, in schools and universities as well. The education bureaucracies and structures developing out of the 19th century reflect their origins in it, as well as the state paternalism of this century, which was a response to its excesses. Now we have an Information Revolution, mind-boggling in its collapse of distance. Computers and telecommunications not only transform our concepts of distance but also our concepts of learning. The enterprise building blocks of the future appear to be horizontal multi-task, networking teams, forming and reforming. Education, centred around learning centres, will follow suit. The assembly line broke work into its component parts, to allow mass production. This model produced learning systems. The information revolution model offers learning opportunities. Such forces, exciting and threatening, demand a responsive and flexible system. Some see the end of present educational institutions. I don't. Ultimately a nation is only as rich as its human capital. This is organised around learning communities, of which the institutions are but one example. But institutions must change, and indeed are changing. The recent education reforms have put in place structures which, if allowed to run without excessive tinkering, will enable institutions to be even more responsive. The shape of education in 2020 will reflect how much they have been allowed, and supported, to respond to demand. My own schooling reflected a drafting race philosophy. At each stage we were divided into winners and losers. The reforms attempt a win/win situation. The reason for my confidence is that in an MMP environment there will be fewer chances for a violent lurch back to past practice or to untested experimentation. The educational choice facing the electorate at present is one of courage - to utilise the possibilities inherent in the reforms. Education is more than just schooling. But people think of it first as what happens in schools. Schools traditionally have four functions. First, custodial: parents wish to know their children are in a safe place. Second, skilling for work and society: children need to learn skills to enable them to take their place as useful and productive members of society. Third, passing on heritage: children need to know the significant values and shared traditions of their culture. These three functions involve age-old educative concepts of discipline, standards and sorting. The fourth function is creating knowledge and enjoyment of learning. This adds a further dimension: enterprise and innovation. Now, a fifth function has been added - a social welfare task. If children are hungry, tired, unhealthy or distressed they cannot learn well. As the family unit changes, some say in many instances disintegrates, society cannot rely upon this support as it has hitherto. These functions are multi-faceted and often contradictory. They are repeated in various combinations in the early childhood and tertiary sectors of education. Throughout the 20th century, the state has increasingly funded tertiary education. More recently there has been added financial support for early childhood care and education. These developments in both sectors built upon the secular, compulsory and free education foundation of the 1877 Education Act. Today 96% of New Zealand school students attend state schools, including integrated schools. This percentage, much higher than in most similar OECD countries, is a special characteristic of New Zealand - a specific internal gravity. Few 'Kiwis' query the role of the state in the school years. It is both major funder and major stakeholder. That is why the Picot report envisaged a tripartite partnership among community, school and state. Within the national curriculum framework, with a charter reflecting their neighbourhood needs, teachers deliver learning to meet the needs of the particular students and community they serve. It is a good concept. The debate is over the public good versus the private good of education outside these compulsory years. This debate came to a head in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as successive Governments tried to cap educational expenditure. No nation can provide a complete, lifelong education from public funding. Increasingly, the state-funded percentage looks set to decline still further. Tertiary delivery (except teacher education, where the state is almost the sole purchaser) is now demand-driven. Basically, the same competitive formula has been applied to the early childhood sector. These arguments over policy reflect a basic tension in our society, where two prospects of freedom are precariously balanced: capitalism, the maximisation of profit; and democracy involving equity and social responsibility. Democracy assumes an educated populace - one that has moved from supervision to freedom. The education reforms aimed for more empowerment - the democratic side of education. But they also carried, via direct funding, the entrepreneurial side of our society. The partnership side assumes rights and obligations. The entrepreneurial side assumes self-generation and self-assembly. The reforms were introduced to bring about a more efficient use of resources and the delivery of a higher quality service. Devolution of responsibility was seen as a means as well as an end. It was also inevitable. The devolution genie only got half way out of the bottle. There are now in some quarters vigorous attempts to push it back in. This centralisation/decentralisation will continue, but forces out in the world will blow the cork out again.

Best practice Already our best educational practice is along the lines needed for the future - group work, projects, ownership of learning, skills across the curriculum, inter-disciplinary studies, greater linkages to enterprise, portable qualifications, holistic learning, collaborative knowledge creation and the blurred boundaries of seamlessness. Learning to learn is crucial - the shelf-life of new knowledge and skills is short. The durability of values and attitudes is more debatable, but in a pluralistic society there is a need for tolerance as well as flexibility. A modern nation is only as

competitive as the extent to which it draws on its pool of human capital. If the choice is to exclude a large percentage of potential talent on gender, ethnic or socio-economic grounds from the advantages of a good education, this is a brake on the nation's development. Individual self-esteem goes hand in hand with national achievement. Current moves to question and shift socially constructed concepts of skill, in relation to race and gender, will, if kept positive, lead to an extension of our pool. To educate people is to empower them and to give them the skills and attitudes to change things around them. Existing and new education institutions have the choice to increasingly tap into the fluid, chaotic force of the vast global multi-media or try to ignore it. The first choice will provide access to the structures and systems which will enable students to organise and analyse information and create knowledge in innovative ways. Skills of information seeking, sorting, storing and retrieval will need to be taught and learnt. In an age of fragmentation, educators will be in demand to produce order (and an appearance of control). But lateral communication will alter their role. Internet does not bring the end of the middleman, but it will change many functions. Increasingly the teacher will become a facilitator (this word should be seen as active, not passive - a facilitator provides and prompts choice, possibilities, alternatives, new avenues, other mentors and facilitators). Diagnostic functions will increase. Conservator or creator is a false dichotomy - teachers will still dispense knowledge and help students place it in context. Another false dichotomy is skills versus knowledge. But undoubtedly new skills and attitudes will need to be taught. Change will happen, however, at a slower pace than anticipated - educational institutions are conservative places. The lower primary school will change less, but for a different reason: learning there is already provided appropriately. The upper primary school will change because a specialised curriculum will start sooner. A harbinger of this is the introduction of foreign language learning to 11 year-olds. Changes in the stages that follow will be even more dramatic. Learning centres will increasingly comprise multi-aged groups. The present lockstep artificial age cohort advancement will change. People will access learning at different ages and stages as their needs vary. Curriculum delivery will increasingly be a team effort. The qualifications framework with its competency-based standards will ease credit transfer and portability of qualifications. Learning centres will tend to specialise. Kura Kaupapa schools are an illustration of the future, a marginalised group creating its own structures within the system to meet its particular needs. Ideally these centres should have a high degree of community involvement (whether changing work patterns will enable this to the desirable level is an important question mark). Teachers will have a linking responsibility between the traditional learning environment and the community. The buildings will become less important in themselves; they will merely be the base for a whole range of learning activities. Telecommunications technology knocks down the existing walls. But people will still need to work and learn together. The hierarchical structure of present educational management reflects its industrial origin. Management of learning centres should be collaborative and team-oriented. Much learning will be negotiated, probably on contract. Delivery will vary - it may be to individuals, small groups or large classes. There will be an increase in marae-based bilingual or immersion learning. Curriculum content will also vary according to need, but for the compulsory years, national guidelines will remain, with the centre being responsible for the actual programme. The teachers themselves in conjunction with the local management, should be responsible for audit, review and the standards of the centres. That is a choice we have not yet made. Learning centres will become international, not just electronically, but also in terms of location. As institutions form loose associations or amalgamate on several campuses, sooner or later they will also form ties with overseas centres or even open their own campus offshore. Increasingly, curriculum is going to become internationalised. As people at various stages of their life need to upskill they will attend some form of learning centre. This raises again the questions of access and funding. If it is for private good only, then either the industry or the individual (or both) will have to make provision. But there is a national spin-off in terms of human capital. There is talk of a zigzag work-path (the concept of career as we have known it is over). One answer is that people will need to take out some form of insurance to cover upskilling costs. Industry training assumes enterprise taking responsibility for its own training. Management training will become increasingly important in terms of a competitive edge. Unless ways are provided for assisting people who for reasons beyond their control are not earning enough to pay for their own educational upskilling then there will be a growing number who are marginalised. We cannot afford to deny such people access to learning. Education cannot ignore questions of equity of opportunity and outcome. There have always been inequities in learning opportunities. Our society has tried to address these. The new global technology opens up the possibility of new 'haves and have nots' - people with access to computer literacy versus those without. It would be tragic if, in the development of learning centres, we create and perpetuate new and large pockets of disadvantage. Ultimately it boils down to what we value. Do we value education? Do we value the people who provide it? How do we measure and reward value addition? The choices we make in answering these questions will shape education in the first two decades of the 21st century, and beyond.

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