

OPINION:



Kelvin Smythe

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After the upheaval of Picot, and hundreds of millions of dollars of extra expenditure – primary education has stalled. Teachers and principals are working ‘harder’. School policy design has never been more comprehensive. Accountability procedures leave nothing unproduced. Principals could go to a leadership course every other week. Buildings and grounds are often breathtakingly flash. Computer suites are common. We have new curricula on which huge amounts of money have been spent on implementation.

Yet primary education has stalled.

There is considerable anecdotal evidence of this stalling if one knows where to look and how to listen. Probably more convincingly for most, though, is evidence from international surveys and the Dunedin-based, Education Monitoring Project.

Why isn’t this stalling, if it is true, more recognised and commented on by those in education? Education has become a big spin city. (Think of the scatterbrained *Education Gazette*, for instance.) Groups within it are entrenched, and are determined to lose none of their power. As well, if individuals raise education problems, they put their jobs and contracts at risk. Those in education know that if a problem is raised, there will be no support from others, and it will be ascribed to personal weakness, to not being up to it. In 1997, I wrote (reproduced in *The Classroom and Beyond*, p. 129): “Ideological corruption occurs when people in education feel constrained by fear and other influences from challenging the official ideology!” The stalling is destined to continue for some time yet.

This may seem pessimistic and, at one level, it is. Structure in the end always wins out over individual will. No school is an island. No school can remain unaffected by the malaise in our education system. However, individual will clearly does count for something, both in the small part people function within and, to that extent, in the system as a whole. After all, primary education may have stalled, but it has stalled at a relatively high level of performance. To cope with the predicament, I find sustaining the idea of being a pessimist in analysis, but an optimist in will. To be positive in day to day working with teachers and children; but persistent in agitating for changes in education structure.

In 1989, in anticipation of Picot, I wrote (in *Developmental Teaching and Learning, Pt 1*, p.41): “What is the good of every other adult group in the system feeling good about their place in it, and teachers not, when it is teachers who, in the end, deliver the goods?” In an analysis of Picot five years later (reproduced in *The Classroom and Beyond*, p.72) I wrote: “We also need to accept another hard point: New Zealand primary education will never be as good as it might have been... It is now time, though, to accept the new reality and make the best use of what clearly is not the best that might have been.”

In responding to the analytic, “what could be a way to improve primary education?” my response represents a considerable irony. Having argued against the radical changes of Picot in favour of evolution, I now find the most attractive way out of the predicament is to follow through on Picot, but this time turning matters in favour of classroom teachers. School charters should be re-established as central to

the functioning of schools and, from there, schools should be allowed considerable latitude in the organisation they decide. Some schools, for instance, might like to link up with the international school system.

Governments should set the scene; produce curriculum statements based on broad aims; develop the teachers; provide funding; require schools to contract for external reviews have supports services at the ready (especially if a school is going very wrong); require schools to pay close attention to safety and equity; have the right to organise national evaluation – but other than that, school education should be left to the parents of children at a school, and the teachers they entrust them to.

Again, as I wrote in a review of Picot after ten years (reproduced in *The Classroom and Beyond*, p.130): “Huge amounts of money will be allocated to arrest the relative decline in primary education. Such amounts will make a difference, but the decline will continue. Years of pain lie ahead. The only solution will be for the head offices and central institutions to relinquish their stifling control over schools. When and if that occurs, New Zealand’s primary school ideology will return to its former health and our teachers will be valued in the way they should be.”

Perhaps I should add as a final note that you know you are valued when you are trusted.

Kelvin Smythe was a former primary teacher, teachers college lecturer, and school inspector. He was editor of *Network Magazine* and is now a producer of curriculum materials.