OPENING ADDRESS TO ‘THE GATHERING’ – 09 JUNE 2012

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E nga mana
E nga reo
E nga hau e wha
Tena koutou, Tena koutou
Tene ta tau ka toa

It is indeed a privilege to give the opening address to the 2012 Gathering.

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the commitment and drive of the organising committee. Without such dedication this event would simply not happen.

Secondly I would like to acknowledge the commitment of all of today’s attendees. The outward signal your presence here sends is that you are committed to the profession of teaching, that you are committed to your own professional learning and that you are committed to the children and students entrusted to your care. That signal can be further amplified by your active engagement in discussions throughout the day.

The conference presents an opportunity for the sharing of ideas, and an opportunity for the interaction between teachers and teacher educators. It also provides an opportunity for the cross pollination of ideas from a range of environments.

In order to start the day off I gave thought to what might be a good prelude to what is to come. A suggestion from a staff member at my College was that I could talk about men in early childhood education as I would be at least 50% qualified to talk about that subject! The advice of George Bernard Shaw also came to mind. A young actor had approached him for advice on giving a 10 minute speech on everything he knew. Shaw’s advice to the young actor was to
speak extremely slowly! As I thought about this opening address my thoughts
turned to what has recently been occupying my own thinking – what has been on
my mind lately.

My recent thinking can be broadly grouped into three areas:

- Quality on a budget and the spin of eloquent rhetoric
- The future of education in Christchurch, an opportunity too important to
  miss, yet too easily lost
- The presence and the influence of leadership – and the concept of the
  emerging teacher leader

I would like to touch on a few issues within each of these streams of thought and
then tie them together with a common thread.

Let me start with ‘Quality on a budget’. I consider that most New Zealanders
accept that within the current global economic environment there is a need to be
financially cautious. To that end a ‘zero budget’ for the country was perhaps not unexpected.

For education the challenge of course, is how to not only maintain quality but
how to keep improving quality with less money.

Static funding rates for ECE ultimately leads to a reduction in funding as inflation
increases. Combined with what is effectively a reduction in funding there is a
target to increase participation to 98% by 2016. This translates to 7,700
additional children to have participated in early childhood education before
beginning school.

The recently released Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2012 – 2017
details the Ministry’s priorities, plans and targets for the next five years. All
people working in education, and all people accessing education will be affected
by it. All of us should read it.
Let me focus on what the Statement of Intent says on the aspect of increasing participation in early childhood education. This is to be done by three interrelated changes:

1. Improving information about quality, participation and results
2. Providing targeted support to those children, families and communities not participating, and
3. Increasing the quality of early childhood education

Drill down another layer within the Statement of Intent and we find further detail on each of these three areas. With respect to improving information, an early childhood information system will be implemented. “The system will enable information about participation in early childhood education to be linked to educational achievement over time, and in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p.17). An improvement in the quality information is to lead to implementation of a new funding system for early childhood education.

With respect to participation, targeted community-based projects and targeted support to increase early childhood education participation are to be implemented. There are clear links to the Governments welfare reform goals and to Ministry of Social Development initiatives.

The statement about increasing the quality of early childhood education refers to the review of the implementation of Te Whāriki currently being undertaken by the Education Review Office. “When the review is completed, we will make implementation activity more effective, and, if necessary, update the curriculum to reflect best practice” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 18).

The Ministry’s Statement of Intent goes on to cover many more aspects of early childhood education, and the schooling and tertiary sectors. There are very specific performance targets. I am not going to give an opinion on them here this morning, suffice to say significant developments are expected on what is in effect reduced funding - meaning things will need to be done differently – better.
Before moving on from the Budget announcements, I can’t help but mention, and offer an opinion on the changes that were proposed to the staffing formulas in schools. I quote from the Ministers speech notes: Raising achievement for all in Budget 2012 which were released on 16 May 2012.

“My primary school teacher tells me my class numbered 42! The important point here is that all the evidence tells us that it is the quality of teaching that makes the difference to learning and achievement, not one or two extra students in a class.”

I assume the evidence to which the Minister refers relates primarily to the work of John Hattie i.e. the single most significant factor influencing student achievement is the quality of the teacher. Few would in a broad sense disagree. But I can tell you there is a hell of a difference between teaching 28, than there is 42! Particularly if some are struggling, some are behaviourally challenging, some have higher educational needs, and if you are teaching that class with the expectations that exist in 2012.

Selective use of research, like statistics is dangerous, shallow, and easily seen through. The myth of the super teacher that can work miracles with the masses day in and day out seems to be alive and well. I am actually OK with reviewing the staffing formulas - they are excessively complicated. However, somehow we need to improve the capability of the teaching profession without reducing the number of professionals within it.

I wrote this passage on Wednesday – the day before the Minister announced a U-turn of the proposed staffing changes. While this announcement mucked up my address – I am happy to concede to the greater good of not losing teachers. However, the politically expedient U-turn avoids what could have led to a healthy debate on how best to use the current staffing resources within the schooling sector.

Finally in this thought stream, is the issue of performance pay or as the Statement of Intent describes it, the “flexibility for principals to reward effective practice by teachers” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 20). Fundamentally this sounds like a good idea.
We all know teachers who despite all the pressures actually do come close to being that mythical super teacher. Reward for going the ‘extra mile’ seems highly appropriate. However, what may make an even greater overall difference is to really and genuinely address the issue of underperforming teachers. Why as a profession do we have a relatively high tolerance of the relatively few, but significant, poor performers?

A word of caution regarding performance pay – be wary of the use of national standards as a measure in isolation. The concept of ‘value added’ is challenging, yet it is the only sensible way of quantifying teacher influence.

I have left the topic of teachers requiring post graduate qualifications alone. This was touched on by the Minister in the budget announcements but I simply do not have the time this morning that this topic requires as it leads to a really healthy discussion about the craft of developing actual teaching practice.

All issues within this thought stream about quality on a budget seem to relate to doing more with less - the challenge of change.

My second thought stream focuses on what education within Christchurch might look like in the future. I, like very few other people, attended a Shaping Education workshop recently in which the document ‘Directions for Education Renewal in Greater Christchurch’ was discussed, and feedback was sought.

We all know the earthquakes have caused change, buildings were damaged, education delivery sites were affected, however the most significant effects will be the cumulative effects of change to the lives of individuals. In the year to July 2011 ECE enrolments in Christchurch were down by 1080. To put that into perspective prior to the earthquakes there were 15380 places with ECE services.

Following the February 2011 earthquake 12000 school students left the school they were enrolled in. Many left the region. In February 2012, 5000 students had not returned to Christchurch schools, and of those that had, 1700 had returned to a different school.
Within tertiary education, domestic enrolments in 2012 are down about 5%. But it has been reported that first year enrolments are down around 28%, this will have a significant flow on effect.

This level of change to educational demographics is substantial and will necessitate significant change. However with change comes opportunity. There is always a need for change in education. As the world, society, and technology increasingly change so must education. We have issues of disparity in education that also need to be responded to. To change outcomes we need to change what we do. In Christchurch we have an opportunity to make unprecedented change that can resist the ‘jelly wobble’ back to its original state.

I use the jelly analogy of change as it represents what too often happens with change - if you remove the immediate change impetus the system wobbles back to its original state. Sometimes to effect real change, you need to pick the jelly up and put it down somewhere else.

What school you went to holds too much importance in our city. Having said that I do think history, identity, culture and school spirit are important. My experience tells me that these things are most highly valued by current students. However, paradoxically students are also the most adaptive to change, more so in my view than teachers.

We have a tremendous opportunity here in Christchurch to innovate. The innovation will inevitably involve rationalization. But it is important to remember innovation not rationalisation must be the driver, as rationalisation won’t necessarily drive innovation.

Whether we as educators like it or not education has a tremendous influence on the social dynamics of a city. Schools often also fill social voids.

Some cities in our country have very clear social divides. In designing the educational network (to use MOE speak) of Christchurch we must be very cautious to avoid creating social divisions.
My final pondering within the thought stream about Christchurch is that we must not let this opportunity be missed. It’s more about a complete rethink – ‘moving the jelly’ - than simply renewal.

My third thought stream was centered around the concept of the teacher leader. Leadership has been a central aspect to the development of our College in recent years. In 2010 we developed and gained NZQA approval of two new ECE leadership qualifications. A Level 7 Certificate and Diploma in Leadership (ECE). We developed these programmes to support the development of leadership practice within the sector. It was encouraging that the 2011 Early Childhood Education Task Force report included a specific recommendation about the content of initial teacher education programmes and the inclusion of leadership. Interestingly both the Graduate Teacher Standards and the Registered Teacher Criteria have implicit rather than explicit leadership aspects.

But if we don’t discuss what it is to be a leader;

and if we don’t include the expectation of leadership within teacher training;

and if we don’t study the conditions from which good leadership practice can best emerge then will we get the leadership our profession needs?

I believe we need effective leadership within education now perhaps more than ever.

Two concepts have recently been occupying my thinking with respect to leadership. The concept of ‘fields of influence’ and the concept of the ‘teacher leader’.

At the recent NZEALS conference in Tauranga I listened to Emeritus Professor Patrick Duigan. Duigan spoke about the concept of “dynamic, integrated and overlapping influence fields as a framework for leading the transformation of learning environments in schools”.

The concept of influence interests me. I have often referred to a definition that described leadership as ‘the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and empower others’.
A key aspect of this definition is the reference to influence. The term influence linked to motivation and empowerment suggests leadership is about inspiring people to want to do, or achieve something, and then enabling them to do it.

Duigan spoke about schools as organisations having networks of nonlinear fields of relationships. He really emphasised the nonlinear aspect. He challenged the concept of distributed leadership as being too simplistic. He argued the rhetoric of distributing leadership is more powerful than the reality. “If you can distribute something then you can take it back”. Duigan made reference to Peter Senge concept of ‘leadership fields’ which Senge (1994, p. 65) describes as “an unseen pattern of structure that is nonetheless real enough to influence behaviour”. This concept is from Senges’ book, The Fifth Discipline which is about learning organisations. Duigan’s own book titled, Educational Leadership: Together Creating an Ethical Learning Environment is on my ‘to read’ list. The concept of leadership as influence sits nicely with the concept of a teacher leader.

A colleague of mine recently gave me some interesting articles to read on this relatively new concept. One article offered the definition of teacher leadership as ‘the process by which teachers, individually or collectively influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.’ (Leeper, Tonneson, & Williams, 2010, p. 17).

The article included a collation of the ways that beginning teachers recognized teacher leaders. They saw them as teachers who:
- Continuously improve their own practice
- Organise and lead reviews
- Provide curriculum development knowledge
- Participate in decision making
- Give training to colleagues, and
- Evaluate the performance of teachers

I thought it was very interesting how perceptive teachers so early in their career were.
The more I think and read in relation to leadership within teaching, the more I become convinced of its importance within initial teacher education. To me this is a good thing because a significant amount of energy and time is being spent at our College developing a new initial teacher education degree that includes a strong component of leadership.

Now when I step back and think about my recent thinking – all three thought streams contain a strong theme of change. Changing financial times and the changing expectations of educational outcomes. The changing educational landscape of Christchurch. The need for teachers to influence their profession and lead change.

It is easy to resist change, and it is easy to complain and protest. It is far more challenging to effect positive change – that is what leaders do.

Being receptive to new ideas, discussing new ideas, challenging and refining new ideas - these are the things today is about.

Michael Fullen is perhaps recognised as the guru of educational change. Much of his work centres around the process of change rather than the specifics of change itself. I think it is important for us all to reflect on how we can suppress the urge to resist change, how we can constructively challenge what may be ill informed change, and how we lead the process of change for the better.

I see that we all have a part to play within what we do every day. The signal we are sending by our presence and our engagement here today is that we are, teacher leaders.

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Presented: 9 June 2012
**Reference List**


