

Contemplating the potential of the Tomorrow's Schools Review Recommendations

Therese Ford. March 2019

As the daughter of a Māori mother and a Pākehā father, my lineage reflects the bicultural partnership represented in the Treaty of Waitangi. I descend from the northern tribe of Ngāi Takoto and my marae is Waimanoni.

I was born in the Far North in the 1970s but I have lived most of my life in the central North Island and was educated in English-medium schools.

While the policy imperatives that underpinned education in the 1970s and 80s were that of integration and biculturalism, I experienced teaching practices that required me to disassociate myself from my Māori cultural identity and assimilate into the dominant culture by thinking, speaking and behaving like a Pākehā. The Tomorrow's School reforms began to emerge the year I entered secondary school and while I was oblivious to the details and intentions of the reforms, I vividly recall the dissonance the introduction of self-governing schools caused in my local community.

I learned more about the Tomorrow's Schools reforms at university while I studied to become a teacher in the English-medium system that I had graduated from. I was amongst the new generation of teachers who would apply for jobs directly to, and be appointed by, principals and boards of trustees.

I have taught and held senior leadership positions in both primary and secondary schools and becoming a parent represented an opportunity for me to become a member of the board of trustees of my daughter's school. It was suggested to me that I put myself forward for the board when I expressed my concern about the lack of engagement with and responsiveness to Māori at all levels of the schooling system.

My concerns were not specific to my own community, but more about the wider education context. This was the catalyst to me entering trusteeship.

2019 is my ninth year of being a trustee. I have governed on a primary school board through three board elections and I joined the board of trustees of a secondary school when my eldest daughter began this phase of her schooling. I consider it to be both a considerable responsibility and a huge privilege to be a trustee.

I have learned a great deal about the potential of parental participation in school governance and I have also been greatly frustrated by the fixed parameters that narrowly confine the board's influence to the governance portfolio. Consequently, I have observed with interest the Tomorrow's School review that was undertaken last year. I participated in one of the many focus group interviews and I have taken the time to read the full report that was published in December.

I now reflect on my experiences from multiple perspectives and then consider these reflections in relation to some of the recommendations that the independent taskforce who undertook the review have proposed.

A student perspective

The concerns I have about the lack of engagement with and responsiveness to Māori in the schooling system were grounded in my own experiences of schooling where, as mentioned previously, my identity as Māori was so effectively ignored by teachers, that I followed their example and ignored it myself throughout my years at school.

This ignorance was achieved through teaching practices that did not acknowledge who I was as a bicultural child, where I came from or what I knew. The ignorance was also supported by curriculum programmes that reinforced the invisibility of Māori people, culture, and language and promoted the superiority of the English language, European history, knowledge, values, and desirable ways of being.

In my own case my bicultural identity provided me with the insight and ability to be Pākehā although this did not markedly enhance my sense of belonging in my schools. I also observed my Māori, Pacific and socio-economically disadvantaged Pākehā peers struggle to fit in and belong as evidenced by the very low numbers of these students in my senior secondary school years.

A mother's perspective

By the time I came to fully understand how instrumental my English-medium education had been in suppressing my Māori culture, language and identity I had two bicultural daughters participating in English-medium education. I was determined that their teachers and school leaders would not, either consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate my experience of education for them.

Despite the fact that my daughters are being educated in the era of Ka Hikitia where the goal of the system is *to ensure Māori students achieve and enjoy education success as Māori*, my eldest daughter was asked to tuck the pounamu taonga she wore around her neck into the collar of her blouse on the second day of transitioning to a new school. As is tradition in our

whānau, she received the pounamu from her grandparents on her first birthday and had proudly worn it every day since as a determined act of exemplifying her identity as Māori. This has always been important to her, particularly since her fair complexion and blue eyes have meant that other children regularly challenged the status she claims as Māori.

She was confused about the request by her teacher to tuck her pounamu away which for her translated to tuck your Māori identity away. I was also confused because I had checked the school's uniform policy and I knew that the wearing of cultural taonga such as pounamu was permitted. We talked about this and concluded that it was likely that the teacher had made an 'unthinking' comment, so we agreed that she would wear the pounamu again the next day outside of her blouse.

It is still painful to recall how difficult it was to see my daughter arrive home the following day with her pounamu not tucked into her blouse but completely removed from her neck. When we discussed what happen she said that the teacher again commented on the visibility of her pounamu. Although the teacher did not request that she remove the pounamu, following the comment she felt it best to take it off and put it in her bag.

A few weeks later, I did have a conversation with the teacher who made this request and I do know that she was unconscious to the spiritual, cultural and psychological significance of that taonga to my daughter and our whānau. When I explained this to the teacher, she was openly distressed that her practice had caused our whānau such pain and was deeply and genuinely apologetic. While we accepted her apology we are still living with the impact of this practice. Years on from this incident our daughter will not wear her pounamu to school opting only to wear it in the safety of Māori cultural contexts such as kapahaka.

This experience has confirmed for me that mandated school and national education policies are important institutions within our education system. Without them, I do not feel that I would have been able to have the conversation I had with the teacher. However, unless the psyche of educators at all levels of the system are exposed, examined and critiqued so that internalised prejudice - either conscious or unconscious - can be challenged and de-centred, the aspirational statements that are articulated in policies will continue to play out as espoused rhetoric for Māori students and whānau like me, rather than our lived reality.

A board of trustee's perspective

As an experienced educator I had some understanding about the difference between management and governance prior to becoming a trustee and I looked forward to being part of school strategic planning. This is part of the governance role that I still really enjoy i.e: working with principals to establish the targets, set the indicators of success and negotiate how the support that is required will be resourced.

Having said this, I am aware that the extent to which the board is given access to and becomes involved in this strategic planning process is highly dependent on the degree to which the principal sees this task as a shared endeavour and provides the board with the opportunity to collaborate.

I know from my networking with members of other boards of trustees, that it is not a given that boards are part of this process. I've been asked to provide advice when some board members have felt that the principal has positioned the board as the sign off agents for the strategic plan as opposed to being active participants in the co-construction of this direction.

For me – my participation in the active co-construction of the strategic direction of each school has largely focused on understanding what is happening for Māori students and what needs to happen to ensure their success.

While I am not the only parent of Māori children on the boards that I serve, I am the only Māori represented (this has been the case for the past 9 years). So, while I can speak to my own aspirations for my children and to a certain extent the aspirations of the Māori community (through my membership in the school whānau groups), I am acutely aware that I do not affiliate to any of the local iwi where my children attend school, so I am not able to contribute a manawhenua (local iwi) perspective to the co-construction of the school's strategic direction.

While it is one thing for boards of trustees to contribute to the development of the school's strategic planning, it is another thing to monitor and question student progress and achievement throughout the year.

When the boards that I serve on are provided with regular progress and achievement reports, concerningly, I have found that the responsibility for asking questions related to the performance of Māori students largely rests with me. In line with the current systemic focus on equity and excellence my questions often focus on how Māori students are progressing and achieving in relation to other students, particularly Pākehā students. I have discouraged the reporting of statistics that compare in-school Māori achievement with national Māori achievement (of similar decile) as I feel that this distracts the board from seeing and understanding the in-school picture of equity. It also serves to perpetuate and legitimate low expectations for Māori as it infers that it is unrealistic to expect that their performance would be comparable with the performance of Pākehā.

I do appreciate that the fact that I ask more questions about Māori student progress and achievement than other board members could be because my children are Māori and I am explicit about my focus on Māori students' success so other board members might feel that they can leave this to me. The absence of questions from them could also be attributed to

my background in education and the knowledge that I have about assessment tools and processes. Or maybe it's because my fellow board members are socialised, either consciously or unconsciously, to not recognise their responsibilities to Māori whānau and for the performance of Māori children? It is possible that it could be none or a combination of two or all three of these factors that mean that Māori student performance at the governance level is often primarily the responsibility of Māori board members.

This latter point was confirmed for me last year at the NZSTA conference following two sessions I co-presented about culturally responsive home-school and community collaborations. After both presentations I was approached by up to 15 Māori board of trustee members (some of whom were in tears) expressing how frustrating, isolating and distressing it was to be the 'lone' Māori on the board of trustees and the only person who seemed to be interested in and committed to improving the experiences and performance of Māori students in their schools.

The conversations with these Māori board members confirmed for me that Māori representation on boards of trustees does not necessarily engender collective responsibility for and commitment to improved outcomes for Māori students or make the aspirations of their whānau more visible.

A further concern and frustration relates to the fine, but very fixed, line between governance and management. Although student achievement is meant to be the board's foremost priority, how frequently this is superseded by discussions that focus on finances, property and employment issues for example, worries me.

Additionally, it perplexes me that as board members we have the authority to appoint principals and teachers as well as decide on whether or not a student should be suspended or excluded from a school, but it is inappropriate for us to question and have an opinion on curriculum programmes and pastoral care practices of the school. These critical systems within the school shape the contexts for learning that are created for students and it is within these contexts for learning that students can develop a sense of belonging, engage in learning and achieve success – or not.

The fact that the board's ability to influence how the strategic plan is operationalised through curriculum programmes and pastoral care within that school system, is limited if not non-existent makes little sense to me.

Having considered my experiences from three different but interconnected perspectives, I now offer my reflections on some of the recommendations that the Taskforce has proposed. In doing so I am also hoping to expose some of the 'myths' and/or misinterpretations that I have encountered through media reports and in my conversations with school leaders.

Such misinterpretations include inferences that the recommendations represent considerable risks which will disadvantage schools and the communities they serve. I suspect that these misinterpretations are a result of misinformation that is likely to be associated with people not reading the full report within which the recommendations are contextualised.

This is concerning as the recommendations need to be understood within the wider context of New Zealand education and society as a whole, if the opportunities and potential of change is to be recognised and subsequently realised.

Recognising the potential of the Tomorrow's Schools Recommendations

The overall findings of the report confirm that:

There is no evidence to suggest the current self-governing schools model has been successful in raising student achievement or improving equity as was intended by its originators.

In fact, the performance of our students has plateaued and in some areas deteriorated, while the gap between the best performing and worst performing students has widened. Children from disadvantaged homes, too many Māori and Pacific families, and those with significant additional learning needs remain those most poorly served by the system.

Equally important, well-being data, such as the prevalence of bullying and self-harm among adolescents, tells us that there is an urgent need to collectively support schools to address complex community and societal challenges (p.11).

As an educator these findings resonate with my own experiences and observations of the education system in the various roles that I have held (formerly as a teacher and senior leader, currently as a professional learning and development facilitator and educational researcher).

While these findings are not surprising to me, they are still deeply disturbing. Ultimately, they signal that significant systemic change is needed to reduce the disadvantage and harm that is currently being experienced by children and their families. This is the contextual reality that our current system is perpetuating and it seems that this is a critically important point that people who are criticising and rejecting the recommendations appear to be missing.

Cultural and structural transformation is the suggested way forward if we are to build a schooling system that enables all learners to succeed. Centring the concept of a *cultural*

transformation is significant for me because it posits an acknowledgement that the cultural context within which compulsory schooling in New Zealand has been conceptualised and is being delivered, is by in large, only working well for groups of students who are not Māori or Pacific or do not have additional learning needs.

In my experience of working across the sector, I have not met an educator who would feel that this is acceptable. However, to date we have responded to these disparities and inequities with structural interventions (short term learning support funding for acceleration, strategy focused professional learning and development initiatives) without exposing, examining, challenging and changing the cultural context (shared traditions, beliefs, valued principles and practices, unconscious and conscious biases) within which the structures are being implemented.

When structures fail to achieve or sustain the expected improvements we seek out another structural response. As a consequence, we get caught in an exhausting cycle of structural intervention and we spiral around in an unseen or ignored cultural context that continues to disadvantage and harm particular groups of students and their families.

The need to focus on an explicit commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi is also an identified priority in the proposed way forward. In each of the perspectives that I have provided, the inconspicuousness of the Treaty partnership is a consistent theme.

It is important to remember that at the point of conception Te Tiriti framed the constitutional relationship between Māori and Pākehā (British settlers). As New Zealand's population became more diverse Tauwi (migrants from countries other than Britain) are recognised as being aligned with Pākehā in their relationship with Māori and accordingly the bicultural partnership positions Māori as one partner and positions Pākehā together with Tauwi as the second Treaty partner. Given that Pākehā as a group are benefiting considerably more than Māori and many Tauwi from the current education system, it is unsurprising that a focus on Te Tiriti would emerge as a priority from the review.

A concerted effort to understand and give active expression to the Treaty would mean that there is a greater likelihood that all Treaty partners could finally begin to enjoy the benefits of success, in accordance with the Treaty's original intent. Active expression to the Treaty would also support a determined critique of the cultural and structural conditions that hold our current system up.

The proposed recommendations that I will discuss next, seek to generate and sustain the cultural and structural transformation that is so desperately needed.

While many of the recommendations seek to reconfigure schooling in order to foster a respectful Treaty partnership, promote the rights of children as culturally located individuals and create learning contexts where children and whānau feel that they belong, for the purposes of this paper, I have discussed the specific recommendations that are most relevant.

Additionally, while I have separated out specific recommendations in this discussion, it is important to remember that each recommendation should not be seen in isolation from the recommendations within each of the key issues or for that matter as being disconnected from recommendations across the key issues. They are interdependent as effective activation of one recommendation is likely to support the activation of another recommendation and thus increase the potential for the improvement that we are seeking to transpire.

Governance - Recommendation 1 The roles of boards of trustees are reoriented:

Based on my observations, this particular recommendation is causing considerable agitation across communities. The agitation appears to be associated with the assumption that boards will have significantly less authority. In reading the report I am unsure as to how people have come to this conclusion.

The recommended reorientation of boards of trustees does allow for boards to maintain their ability to appoint principals, determine the strategic and annual plans and manage funds that are raised directly by their school community.

While boards can continue to advise on property, finances and health and safety, their portfolio widens to enable them to advise on pastoral care (student well-being, belonging and success) as well as localised curriculum and assessment practices. The opening up of this opportunity would address the concerns I have had as a trustee regarding our inability to influence pastoral care and curriculum from a positive, potential based perspective.

Included within this reoriented framework is the requirement that mana whenua be represented on boards. The inclusion of this important perspective exemplifies a structural change that could influence a cultural transformation given the potential it represents for active expression to be given to Te Tiriti.

This also enables the opportunity (in a more determined way), for mana whenua to contribute to the development of localised curriculum that honours the histories and mana (integrity) of the Treaty partners and enhances the culture, language and identity of all students.

Governance - Recommendation 2 Local Education Hubs are established:

The establishment of local Education Hubs is another recommendation that is causing a great deal of dissonance.

Again, a perceived reduction in control for boards and principals seems to sit at the heart of these concerns. Disappointingly, it seems the systemic challenges and disadvantage that this recommendation seeks to address are mitigated and subsumed by the interests of particular groups of people who are determined to maintain the equilibrium that comes with having power and being in control.

Primarily, *“Education Hubs would focus on students’ success including well-being, belonging, achievement and engagement”* (p.49). The report details at length the implications within the current system which have meant that for many schools and communities, this focus has become distorted or in the worst cases de-prioritised. For principals and schools who have struggled to source adequate expertise within their communities to manage business portfolios and/or meet legislation regulations the Education Hubs provide a specialised, connected and responsive support network.

The findings of the review indicate that a coherent and trustworthy support network is not a reality through the Central Education Agencies that currently sit in the system. For boards who are able to manage their own business interests there is the option for property development for example, to be delegated from the hub back to schools (p.50, 52, 53).

Additionally, it is important to note that advice and support on traditional governance matters (property maintenance, procurement services, human resource management) is available at the school’s request rather than being imposed conventions.

The recommendation that the group of directors that will govern the Education Hub should consist of practicing educators (at least half) and local iwi representation has the potential to address some of the concerns that I have raised in the earlier discussion.

If educators with complementary expertise play a key role in governance, we might well expect that a determined focus on leadership and teaching practice that enhances well-being, belonging, achievement and engagement would be maintained and that there is less risk that this would be overpowered by business management agendas.

Additionally, the provision for iwi to be represented at this level of governance again compliments an active expression being given to Te Tiriti and it enhances the potential for greater engagement and responsiveness to Māori students and their whānau.

Teaching – Ensure that there is a coherent future-focused workforce strategy, including ensuring that Initial Teacher Education provision is future-focused and fit for purpose.

This recommendation and the associated recommendations in the Teaching section of the report recognises that excellence and equity will not be achieved without a commitment to invest in a highly skilled and fit-for-purpose education workforce. These recommendations connect directly to the perspectives that I have shared:

Māori students, Pacific students, and others have recently been clear and straight-talking about how to improve their experiences of schooling. As a country we are now conscious of the need to respond more effectively to the deficit thinking, unconscious bias and racism that evidence shows has lowered our expectations of success for particular groups of students for too long.

Responding effectively means tackling our existing assumptions – ‘unlearning’ in order for new learning to take hold – and building strong and trusting relationships.

Within the workforce strategy, there is provision to ensure that our teaching population becomes more diverse in order to better match student diversity therefore it is not surprising that Initial Teacher Education is part of these recommendations.

While the importance of Initial Teacher Education provision is identified, for in-service teachers and leaders, Education Hubs provide a context through which professional learning and development and advisory services can be coordinated “in order to provide local support and grow and sustain local expertise” (p.95).

The future-focused framing of these recommendations resonates with me as they seek to strengthen connections and coherence across the education sector so that educators are better positioned to respond to the students who have been least well served by the system both historically and presently.

I see this as being critical for enhancing greater levels of student success and for giving active expression to Te Tiriti.

School Leadership – That the Leadership Centre be established within the Teaching Council.

I welcome the establishment of a Leadership Centre that is focused on providing specialised professional learning and support for leadership at all levels of the school. Connecting the centre to Education Hubs through leadership advisors and leadership networks enhances the potential for systemic coherency for school leadership.

The recommendations reference the Leadership Strategy and the complimentary Leadership Capabilities as key structures within the system to support capacity and capability building.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is explicit within these documents which is critically important. If we are indeed going to shift out of the current structural pattern of articulating egalitarian policy rhetoric, enact a systemic cultural transformation and give active expression to Te Tiriti, leaders at all levels of the system will need to be at the forefront of this change. This will require a determined Aotearoa-specific approach to leadership that is deliberately de-colonising (treaty-honouring), anti-racist, emancipatory and focused on ensuring that both the mana and mauri (inner essence and vitality) of all learners is at the centre.

I see little evidence that current leadership professional learning and support mechanisms prioritise these dispositions and I would suggest that there is a correlation between this and the levels of disadvantage and harm that our system is perpetuating.

Resourcing – Applying the proposed equity index

The findings in this report (and the research referenced within) affirms my own observations that education is inadequately funded.

Additionally, the decile rating system is not promoting equity and is contributing to negative stereotyping of disadvantaged communities (which are usually made up of Māori and Pacific whānau). Ultimately the decile system supports racial segregation which is harmful for already disadvantaged students and represents a missed opportunity for cross-cultural relationships for students who are not disadvantaged.

While the proposed equity index is not the single solution to this issue, it does better identify the schools with the highest proportion of seriously disadvantaged students. From this, the rationale for increased resourcing for these schools can be clarified and the taskforce has proposed that this be done as soon as possible.

Central Education Agencies - The Ministry of Education is reconfigured and an independent Education Evaluation Office is created

In terms of the Ministry of Education, the review found that there is a need for, internal systems to focus: *“far more on outcomes, processes and relationships than on audit and risk and ... interdependent rather than a hierarchical relationship with regions and schools”* (p.117).

This reconfiguration of the Ministry of Education and the associated recommendation of the creation of an independent Education Evaluation Office are important and necessary if both a cultural and structural transformation across the system is to be achieved. Dedicated units within the Ministry of Education focused on Curriculum, Learning,

Assessment and Pedagogy have the potential to create the repositioning that needs to happen so that these units of expertise can interface in a more coherent manner with the local expertise contained within the Education Hub to enhance tailored and authentic learning.

Additionally, activating evaluation processes at the macro (Ministry of Education) and micro (Education Hub) levels provides a mechanism by which the organisational culture and responsiveness, effectiveness of interdependent relationships and specified national educational goals can be monitored and measured.

There have been widespread conversations about what this reconfiguration of the Ministry of Education will look like.

Some concerns relate to the risk that the development of Education Hubs will ultimately facilitate the transition of bureaucratic people and structures, from regional ministry offices into more localise Education Hubs.

I concur with these concerns and would suggest that this is exactly what will happen if these changes follow an entrenched pattern of superficial structural modifications that are isolated from cultural critique. If a cultural transformation that enables active expression to be given to Te Tiriti is what we are seeking, all of the recommendations, and particularly these recommendations in this area of Central Education Agencies are critical therefore, careful consideration needs to be given to *who* will design the Education Hubs.

The findings clearly identify the implications associated with the hierarchical relationship that the Ministry of Education in particular, currently has with schools.

These recommendations provide an opportunity for the hubs to be designed from the bottom up, from communities so that the hub is personalised to the schools that it seeks to serve. If the design gives active expression to Te Tiriti then theories of change and improvement would reflect research of what works for Māori and te reo Māori would be a prioritised language. Such a foundation would enable hubs to be proudly and authentically bicultural and bilingual and well positioned to realise the promises inherent in the Treaty partnership.

Closing reflection

I entered into trusteeship in response to my concerns about the lack of engagement with and responsiveness to Māori at all levels of the schooling system and this remains a core value that guides my approach to governance and how I work with school leaders and teachers.

The original intent of Tomorrow's Schools was *"to make schools more responsive to their communities and significantly improve Māori students' learning experiences and success"* (p.23). In the three decades that we have operated under these reforms, too many schools are not well positioned to respond to their communities and the latter intention is yet to be realised.

As I've observed debate about the recommendations play out on national television, within newspapers and across the community consultation meetings, I have been stunned by how largely invisible Māori and Pacific peoples are in the conversation. The media do not appear to be actively seeking out and/or communicating Māori and Pacific perspectives. The people who are getting media coverage intently focus on the detrimental impact of the recommendations on themselves and remain silent about the potential the recommendations represent for groups who are disadvantaged by the current system.

Sadly, Tomorrow's Schools reforms have conditioned many of us with influence and interest in education to focus almost exclusively on ourselves and our own contexts.

We have become so fixated on our own advancement that we either do not see those who are not benefiting, or we ignore them or we become so obsessed with competing with and beating perceived rivals, that we are utterly oblivious to the plight of the children and families who ultimately have no choices and whose voices are lost in this conversation.

The report is entitled: *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together Whiria Ngā Kura Tūātitini*. I view this as both a call and a challenge to all who have influence and interest in education, especially boards of trustee members, school leaders and teachers. The aspiration of being stronger together will only materialise if the people with power and privilege who benefit from the current system support changes that will enable the disadvantaged to be advanced.

The children, whose voices have been represented in this report are appealing to us to recognise that significant systemic change, a cultural and structural transformation is overdue and necessary.

As a mother, a board member and an educator, I strongly feel that we have a responsibility to enact both individually and collectively the changes that will enable us to shift the rhetoric of *well-being, belonging, achievement and engagement for all students* that we espouse today, so that it can become the reality that our children and grandchildren live in the future.

References:

Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce (2018) [*Our school futures: Stronger together. Whiria Ngā Kura Tūātitini.*](#) Ministry of Education, November 2018.



Therese Ford

therese.ford@waikato.ac.nz