Uncovering meanings:
The discourses of New Zealand secondary teachers in context

Noeline Alcorn and **Martin Thrupp**
University of Waikato

Abstract

Recent official policy discourses on student achievement have stressed the importance of teachers and the impact that effective teaching can have on student life chances and on national economic performance. There is also a body of research on the way teaching and learning are affected by school context. This article discusses research designed to investigate how and to what extent the contextual features of schools impacted on the beliefs New Zealand secondary teachers and principals held about teaching and learning, the extent to which they believed their agency could influence outcomes for their students, and the aspirations and goals they pursued. We interviewed principals and teachers in six secondary schools, two each in high, mid and low socio-economic areas. The findings show considerable commonality in teachers' pedagogical discourses and that the rhetoric of formal policy discourses is pervasive and normalized in schools. All the teachers believed they could make a difference to student achievement and life chances, tried to address diversity among their student bodies, and saw success as much wider than academic achievement. Concurrently we found that the institutional habitus of each school largely determined how discourses were enacted and that relationships, confidence, student-centredness and success were interpreted differently between schools. We argue that these differences must be taken into account if school policies and interventions are to be successful.

Keywords: context; student achievement; teacher beliefs; policy enactments.

Introduction

In recent years official policy discourses around student achievement in schools have often stressed the importance of teachers and the impact that effective teaching can have on student life chances and on national economic performance. Governments around the world, seeking to raise test scores, have seized on research that emphasises this impact. New Zealand reflects this pattern (Alton Lee, 2003; Hattie, 2009) and has sought ways to increase teacher effectiveness through promoting pedagogical strategies, curriculum initiatives and professional development. While this has many positive aspects, it also has the potential to hold teachers responsible for student achievement regardless of other considerations such as school context and therefore to blame teachers if students are not achieving according to specified norms and expectations. Media publication of league tables detailing school performance in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), for example, may lead to perceptions that teachers in lower socio-economic schools are less skilled or committed than those in more affluent areas (Thrupp & Alcorn, 2011).

There is also a considerable body of theory and research that seeks to understand the way teaching and learning are affected by various elements of school context (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011; Lupton, 2004; Metz, 1990; Mills & Gale, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Thrupp, 1999; Thrupp & Lupton, 2011; Thomson, 2002). Relevant aspects of school context include student intake characteristics, school history and location, and relationships with other local schools. This literature argues that better recognition of local contextual complexity could give rise to fairer national evaluation of school performance, fairer distribution of resources, and the provision of more appropriate advice and support to schools. Hence there is the need for research to consider school context in more detail in order to provide a stronger underpinning for contextualised policy and practice.

The research discussed in this article was designed to investigate how, and to what extent, contextual features impact on the beliefs New Zealand teachers and principals hold about teaching and learning, the extent to which they believe their agency can influence outcomes for their students, and the aspirations and goals they pursue. The study posed three key questions:

- What espoused beliefs, assumptions and goals animate the everyday work and sense of agency of staff in a group of New Zealand secondary schools with diverse student intakes and other contextual characteristics?
- To what extent are these espoused beliefs common across and within schools?
- How much do espoused staff beliefs reflect official policy discourses around pedagogy and associated professional development emphases?

The research process

To investigate these questions we undertook research in six New Zealand secondary schools. Our choice of schools reflected our understanding, well supported by research (Braun et al., 2011; Lupton, 2004; Smyth & McInerney, 2007, Thomson, 2002; Thrupp & Lupton, 2011) that the socio-economic status of school intakes has a considerable influence on school processes and culture. Thus our sample included schools in different school deciles which are determined by the Ministry of Education for equity-funding purposes (decile-one having the greatest proportion of students from low socio-economic families, decile-ten the least). They comprised:

- *Two suburban higher socio-economic schools:*

Gandalf College (decile-eight) and Tolkien High School (decile-eight) were both large schools with a long tradition of success in academic, sporting and cultural activities. A high proportion of their students remained at school for five years and continued into tertiary education. The schools were well supported by their parent communities, enrolled international fee-paying students and held ballots for out-of-zone students. Both schools had a predominance of Pakeha/European students but Tolkien had a range of ethnic groups, with a growing number of Asian students. Gandalf's student body was more ethnically homogenous but with more Māori students.

- *Two mid-socio-economic schools:*

Galadriel Girls' High School (decile-six) was sited in the centre of a city and Hobbiton High School (decile-five) in a small rural town. The girls' school offered a wide range of subjects and activities, drew students from across the city, and had a proud history of achievement. It enrolled international students and held a ballot for out-of-zone students. Hobbiton High School had reversed a period of falling rolls and was experiencing strong growth and rising achievement levels. It felt well supported by its largely rural community, many of whom had earlier attended the school. It was looking to the future and focusing on ICT, critical enquiry and personal skills, seeking to raise aspiration and achievement. In both schools a majority of students were Pakeha with about 33% Māori at Galadriel and 40% at Hobbiton. Hobbiton had five international students.

- *Two lower socio-economic schools:*

Brandybuck High School (decile-three) was the only school in a small rural town and catered for students from years 7–13 (about ages 11–18, whereas most New Zealand secondary schools start at year 9 when students are about 13); 72% were Pakeha, 25% Māori. It was the smallest (roll approximately 800) in our sample but it was supported by the community, and seen as providing a friendly environment with a focus on both academic and practical subjects. It enrolled a growing number of international students. Aragorn College (decile-one) served an urban community with high unemployment, where approximately a third of parents/caregivers were beneficiaries. Its ethnic mix included 45% Māori, and 45% Pasifika. Though the school was welcoming of all comers, there was a significant exodus of students out of the area at both years 7 and 9.

All six schools were experiencing a transition from what they perceived as more "traditional" content-based forms of curriculum and pedagogy to more inclusive and process-oriented ways. They all reported a more diverse student body which provided challenges as staff strove to understand cultural differences and respond appropriately and effectively. Three had engaged with the professional development opportunities offered by Te Kotahitanga (Bishop & Glynn, 2003) to assist in this process. This is a government-funded professional development programme to help teachers develop more culturally responsive pedagogies, particularly in relation to Māori students. Most of the schools had found the recent economic recession impacted on the senior school as students unable to find jobs locally returned to school, necessitating changes to curriculum to provide more practical and life-skills education.

We visited each school twice. On the first visit, we interviewed the principal about the school context, its neighbourhood, history, organisation, espoused values and goals. As well as local contextual issues we were interested in the perceived impact of the broader national policy context of increasing accountabilities, the new *New Zealand Curriculum*, developments in ICT, and international surveys of literacy, mathematics and science. We examined prospectuses and websites to view how the school presented itself to the wider community. On the second visit we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the principal and 4–5 other staff, probing

for their assumptions and beliefs about the characteristics of good teaching. These 32, hour-long semi-structured interviews, also explored teachers' sense of agency and their beliefs about what constituted success for their students. Interviewees were invited to view and amend their transcripts for accuracy. We then closely analysed the data within and across cases to identify first key recurring words and phrases and then emerging themes.

Findings

Similar to other studies, our data revealed significant differences between deciles—particularly the impact of the socio-economic differences between decile-eight and decile-one schools. However, there were also significant within-decile differences between the two suburban decile-eight schools, based primarily on the different character of the middle-class neighbourhoods they served. The geographical locations emerged as important. Decile-six Galadriel Girls' High appeared to have more in common with the decile-eight schools, whereas decile-five Hobbiton High School shared a number of characteristics with Brandybuck High School which also served a mixed semi-rural community. The gap between decile-one Aragorn College and decile-three Brandybuck High School appeared to us immense, in terms of their contexts, the resources they could draw on and the way the staff were responding to the context. Size was another contextual variable. The larger schools were able to offer a range of options and opportunities that smaller and lower-decile schools were unable to match. While all acknowledged that students faced an unknown future and substantial social and technological change, for the lower-decile schools in particular there was a perception that students would need to leave their local community, at least temporarily, for study, employment and other experiences. To do so the students might need to adopt different values and aspirations from those of the local community. This could impact on teaching in subtle ways and had the potential to create dissonance between home and school.

As Thrupp (1999) demonstrated, a major difference for teachers in high- and low-decile schools is the ability of high-decile, middle-class schools to concentrate on teaching without major concerns over attendance, lateness, unpreparedness and disruptive behaviour. When problems arise there is normally congruence between the attitudes of parents and teachers, and support from home. There was some evidence of this in our study. A senior teacher at Tolkien High School commented:

> We can focus particularly on the business of learning because we're not diverted by bad behaviour. We're not overwhelmed by problems like truancy and violence and gangs and that sort of stuff. We have the luxury of being able to focus on engaging kids. (Tolkien High School)

For Aragorn, things were very different. While all schools experienced some problems with transience, teachers interviewed here noted they had to cope with truancy, lateness, and students coming to school but attending only some classes, wearing inappropriate clothing, coming to class without writing materials, and lacking confidence that they could succeed at school. This meant there was less time for direct teaching. Aragorn had close relations with approximately one-third of its

Māori parents, whose children were enrolled in a special Māori unit, but otherwise communication could prove difficult. The fact that security measures had to be taken to keep students safe added to the difficulties of community integration, as did poor public transport, language differences and the lack of community organizations and centres. Inevitably these differences shaped teachers' perceptions of teaching and what level of achievement was possible.

There was also a mismatch between schools in the study in the extent of resources available to support teaching and learning. As principals noted, resources include both time and money. The lower-decile schools reported they found it difficult to raise money beyond their government grants. They had to spend time and effort gathering parental donations and in sometimes budgeting for refundable loans to enable parents to purchase uniforms or books. The donations they could request were lower. They needed to explore creative ways of raising money. Hobbiton High pursued Trust funding to invest heavily in ICT and also made creative use of staff expertise in developing connectivity. Only higher-decile city schools were able to generate international students' fees to develop facilities and resources. As for time, Tolkien High could send students home early on occasion to allow for staff professional learning activities. However, the possibility of family and community disruption prevented staff at Aragorn College from doing so.

In this paper we focus particularly on responses teachers at the six schools gave to questions about their understanding of "good teaching", and to questions about the definition of student "success" and how teachers believed it could be fostered. Certain keywords and concepts occurred with great frequency and there was significant agreement among those interviewed about the attributes and behaviours of good teachers. In general, their discourse reflected that in widely disseminated Ministry of Education (MoE) studies such as the Best Evidence Synthesis (Alton-Lee, 2003) and the literature underpinning programmes such as Te Kotahitanga (Bishop & Glynn, 2003). The apparent congruence enabled us to construct a composite picture of a good teacher from the responses these teachers made when asked to describe a colleague whose teaching skill and competence they admired. This composite (below) uses phrases that recurred across all schools:

> *A good teacher is enthusiastic and committed, well prepared and flexible. Students enjoy his/her classes and are clear about expectations for each lesson and, if possible, where the current work fits into the longer term planning. S/he provides timely formative assessment and includes students in the planning and evaluation of their work. Teacher planning reflects careful consideration of where each student is at. S/he has a wide repertoire of appropriate teaching strategies and forms strong and respectful relationships with students and colleagues, engaging them in their learning. S/he is a reliable colleague, reflective in practice, collaborative, open to new ideas and willingly engages in ongoing collective professional dialogue and development.*

In 20 of the 32 interviews there was mention of a shift in recent years from the transmission of disciplinary knowledge to a more relational, student-focused and overtly pedagogical approach. In some cases there was criticism of colleagues who

were reluctant to adapt to new teaching strategies, often because they had experienced "success" as teachers until now. Such colleagues were seen as discipline rather than student-focused. At the same time the pace of change in education was seen as unrelenting.

Staff in all six schools used similar terminology to talk about teaching and learning which, in the main, reflected MoE-favoured discourse about pedagogy. On closer examination, however, we found that key terms often carried different meanings in different school settings. While there was widespread agreement about the attributes and behaviours of good teachers, the rhetorical congruence often masked significant differences, as classroom practice was shaped by contextual variables such as parental and student expectations and aspirations, resourcing, social and cultural mix, and location. We tried to uncover some of these differences through comparing responses to four major assumptions our interviewees identified as fundamental to effective pedagogy: the importance of relationships; developing student confidence; student-centred teaching; and promoting student success. Each of these themes is discussed below. In presenting these views, we do not want to underplay intra-school difference, which we have addressed elsewhere (Thrupp & Alcorn, 2011), nor are we concerned with fine-grained critical discourse analysis in a social context (Fairclough, 2003) but rather engaging in discourse-oriented thematic analysis. We believe that what is offered here illuminates and illustrates the importance of context in teacher perceptions and discourse.

The importance of relationships

Staff across all six schools were adamant that good relationships with students were fundamental to successful teaching:

> Relationship is absolutely the first and most important thing, especially here where the student needs to know you know who they are and that you think they are OK. Kids take it to heart so quickly if they think a teacher does not like them. [In] simply saying hello and looking right at them and smiling you've broken down the biggest barrier to any of their learning. (Aragorn College)
> If you have a positive relationship with your students it just happens in your classroom. (Brandybuck High)
> The real strength of most of the teachers in this college is their commitment to the students and their willingness to form a relationship with the kids and take into account their personalities and their home situations and their lives [...] and be very supportive and helpful. (Gandalf College)

These comments reflect key messages promoted in Kotahitanga and *New Zealand Curriculum*-based professional development programmes. On closer analysis, however, we found that perceived student attitudes towards teachers, often based on those of their parents, could affect the nature of the teacher–learner relationship. This appeared to be strongly related to decile rating. At the two decile-eight schools, students arrived with high expectations about the professionalism and support to

which they felt entitled. Their relationships with their teachers tended to focus on learning and achievement:

> The students in this school are actually quite demanding. [..] in the sense that they have expectations of you as a teacher and if you don't quite cut it they'll tell you so. (Tolkien High)

If students in these schools were less committed to learning and achievement, they felt entitled to ignore teachers or not afford them respect:

> Gandalf has definitely got a big city attitude amongst its kids and there's a certain amount of arrogance here at times and I think that's because we're a high decile school, by the fact that some of them feel their parents could buy and sell teachers so "why should I listen to you?" (Gandalf College)

At the other end of the continuum, teachers at decile-one Aragorn College identified a lack of student self-esteem, in spite of the adult-level responsibilities for siblings and older relatives they carried. Unlike the students at the decile-eight schools, Aragorn students, though open to reciprocity, lacked a sense of entitlement and needed constant reinforcement. They had no confidence that things would "go right" for them. They were accepting of teacher behaviour, not critical of it:

> Kids at Aragorn are tolerant of teachers and they're much more tolerant of systems. If they think that people are willing to give them a go, they'll be very, very cooperative.
> The kids here are great. You can be really honest with them; they're honest with you. You can have some difficulties one day and the next day it's mostly all forgotten about and you move on.

In the two small rural schools many of the staff knew their pupils and families out of school. Teachers were involved in sports, in community groups, and met parents constantly through local business activities.

> Because it's a small community and this is the only school and we see a lot of those students outside of school, it's a lot more personal [than in other schools the teacher had taught at] and that carries over into the classroom. (Brandybuck High)

Staff in these two schools reported that students expected reciprocal relationships where they were free to ask personal questions of their teachers and had a genuine curiosity about their lives:

> The students here are very friendly, they like to know who you are and probably even before you start trying to get learning underway they want to have a relationship with you first, build it to know who you are. (Hobbiton)

Students here expected teachers to be interested in their well-being as people rather than just in their classroom learning.

> Once you've got a relationship with your kids then they want to be with you and if anything goes wrong [...] they'll come and tell you,

> and not so much for me to fix it [...] they just want you to know
> what's happening. (Hobbiton)

While all the schools had devised strategies to enhance teacher–student relationships, the expectations of students were a major determinant of the character of these relationships.

Building student confidence

Building student confidence was seen as critical in each of the schools. "It is the starting point. If you haven't got a sense of self-efficacy then you will find that learning becomes difficult from the start" (Hobbiton High). However, this was an area where variation between schools was obvious. Teachers at Aragorn College saw lack of student confidence as their greatest challenge since it inhibited learning and motivation. Staff attributed this lack of confidence squarely to students' socio/cultural and economic backgrounds:

> The biggest thing is lack of confidence in themselves and their place
> in the world and that's the inferiority thing children from a lower
> socio-economic background just inherently pick up and I think the
> greatest challenge in teaching is getting them to stop thinking of
> themselves in a category like that.

This lack of student confidence had a major effect on teaching. Aragorn College made an intensive push to improve basic literacy and numeracy, which lagged well below national expectations on entry. Collaborative activities were favoured. In general it was thought essential to engage in group-work before attempting individual assignments:

> Because they lack self-confidence they are not as capable of getting
> beyond that and then attacking a task on their own. If you can
> integrate it in some cooperative or peer work that just builds their
> confidence up, that yes, they do know how to do it.

Lessons at Aragorn were often highly structured. Teachers tried to build a consistent approach to scaffolding processes "the Aragorn way", which was used from years 9–12. Lack of confidence and aspiration were also seen as the reason that many students seemed capable of working only if the teacher was in the room, engaging with them. Rules and routines, humour and avoiding confrontation were felt to aid student confidence.

At decile-three Brandybuck High School, a key staff ambition was to raise student aspirations. While their students had basic social confidence, teachers interviewed felt the small community limited student perspectives, that students and their families were unaware of the range of career or tertiary study options. "I think parents want their kids to come to school and to do well but they don't necessarily see a direction for them". Following a number of school initiatives, more students were attempting higher-level qualifications and going on to tertiary study. There were similar feelings at decile-five Hobbiton High where the school perceived students and their families in this modest-income small town needed to develop greater ambition, so provided tangible incentives for students to raise their sights to

achieve endorsements for merit or excellence in NCEA rather than being satisfied with bare passes.

The three higher-decile schools drew on a long history of success that was communicated in a variety of ways. Students, often already ambitious, were encouraged to strive to excel in fields that excited them. Principals and teachers interviewed claimed it was important to provide a wide raft of opportunities so students could engage in different activities. At the same time they cautioned that students needed to learn to ask critical questions, and appreciate the views of others. Sometimes students and parents at these schools were seen by teachers as over-ambitious and confident, needing to develop more realistic expectations. A teacher at Gandalf College noted that a high proportion of parents believed their children were gifted and should achieve an Excellence endorsement in NCEA whereas this was likely to be limited to fewer than 5% of students.

Student-centred teaching

Student-centred teaching was endorsed at all schools. Often this was highlighted on websites and in prospectuses. For example, Hobbiton High School proudly claimed that teachers as professionals aimed to "form strong positive learning partnerships with each and every student". However, in each school context, the understanding of what it meant to be student-centred varied: the extent to which teacher power was shared with students or that student voices shaped teaching and learning differed. This was an area influenced by overall context, institutional habitus and the agency of individual teachers. Reay, David, and Ball (2001, section 1.3) note that institutional habitus "constitute[s] a complex amalgam of agency and structure" similar to individual habitus and can be understood as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation". They also note that institutional habituses become established over time and, because of their collective nature, can be difficult to change.

Some schools and teachers claimed to focus explicitly on co-construction of learning. This was most pronounced at mid-decile Hobbiton and Galadriel Girls' High where staff were engaged in intensive professional development through Te Kotahitanga, in which co-construction is stressed and practised, though staff at Aragorn and Gandalf Colleges also alluded to it. There were outstanding exemplars. For instance, a teacher at Hobbiton, who championed students taking control of their own learning, had worked with a class of year 12 girls enrolled in a health-promotion module. After going through a critical learning cycle based on their own environment, these students identified risky sexual behaviour among year 10 girls. Pupils researched questions, found guest speakers, engaged with the principal and school nurse, then organised and led a workshop assembly for the younger students. Finally, teachers and students together evaluated the work and its outcomes.

At Galadriel Girls' High School some teachers were experimenting with enquiry learning methods. They noted that a focus on student-centred learning highlighted the need to develop new diagnostic tests in some subjects. Available tests indicated that a number of students had not reached the expected standard but the tests provided little help in designing or personalising further learning. Teachers also

looked for ways of ensuring students experienced success, finding that girls got discouraged quickly if they were constantly finding they had not achieved a target. Student-centred learning often involved group work as teachers found their female students less competitive and enjoying cooperative learning. None suggested, as at Aragorn, that group work was adopted as a result of low student confidence.

On the other hand at Tolkien High, a school where independence and individuality were highly valued, teachers sought to adjust their teaching to suit individual learning styles. Rather than develop a "Tolkien way", as the staff at Aragorn had done, Tolkien sought to allow students the opportunity to determine their preferred ways of working. This was part of their push to help students take responsibility for their own learning and develop independence:

> There's a strong focus on differentiation. [...] teachers are genuinely giving kids choices about how and why and what they do in [their work outcomes]. I always give them a choice [...] but the structures are around deadlines and feedback and feed-forward. (Tolkien High)

Teachers interviewed at Gandalf College suggested that the culture of the school was conducive to acceptance of different talents, and thus student-centred:

> Being quirky or slightly out of the ordinary, [...] becomes more and more accepted as kids move up. I always feel a sense of pride at the way kids who wouldn't always be accepted in other social situations are embraced. (Galdalf College)

Gandalf College tried to address the differing needs of groups of students through providing options. The technology department, for example, catered both for talented students who won scholarships to study engineering at university, and for more practically oriented students who carried out workshop activities and commissioned work for local industry.

Brandybuck High School, (years 7–13), had determined to pursue an integrated curriculum to meet the perceived needs of students. While this had both firm supporters and some sceptics (who worried about students acquiring the necessary background to pursue a differentiated curriculum in the senior school), there was a belief that integration and enquiry learning processes would make it easier for high-achieving students to develop the skills in synthesis they would need for tertiary study:

> The only way to change our NCEA results is to actually focus on quality teaching and learning. That's been fundamental in our shift to a connected curriculum approach in the junior part of the school because you won't get good Scholarship grades if your kids don't know how to apply information in different places and that's where connectivity across different learning areas will make a difference. (Brandybuck High)

It was also believed that the students who left school at age 16 would have a broader base of understanding because of the integrated study in which they had been engaged.

At Aragorn, where classroom protocols were more standardised in the belief that this would help their students learn more effectively, student-centred teaching involved respecting student mana and ensuring that students understood behavioural expectations. A teacher at Aragorn spoke of compassion and the need to be prepared to spend time with students:

> When they have done something wrong [rather than] just punish them straightaway [...] initially you talk to them about why they behaved that way or what's wrong about why they behaved that way before you start talking about more draconian steps like punishing them.

The meaning of student success

Questions posed during interviews probed teachers' perceptions of what student success meant and the extent to which the school could help students reach personal goals. All teachers defined success holistically and felt that their work made a difference to students' lives. They aimed to enhance students' confidence and equip them to meet the challenges of life after school. Generally they welcomed the new *New Zealand Curriculum* documents with their emphasis on key competencies, believing this justified their emphasis on defining success broadly, including social and personal as well as academic skills. Competencies such as communication, resilience, collaboration and flexibility were valued across the spectrum.

Mission statements reflected these views. While Aragorn College valued excellence in personal performance, the school looked for "honesty, integrity, high standards of behaviour and self discipline—together with tolerance and respect for others". Brandybuck High School wanted all students to be "given the opportunity to reach their potential in as many areas of school life as possible in a caring, supportive, and friendly atmosphere". Hobbiton High School's website stated unequivocally that the school was future-oriented. To develop capacity to succeed, students needed to become "technologically literate, able to gain new knowledge and skills with relative ease". Tolkien claimed to be "a school that has a passion for learning and intellectual vitality and is committed to the development of active, confident, creative and innovative learners".

Extra-curricular activities were seen to play an important role in helping students develop competence and confidence, the skills to work collaboratively and respect the views of others. Economic and social differences were evident here. Gandalf, Galadriel and Tolkien, all large, well-resourced schools, were able to offer a wide range of opportunities. They prided themselves on their facilities for music or drama and aimed to have all students involved at some level. It was expected that some senior staff would attend all functions. Successes were celebrated: their websites featured changing pictures of students excelling in different areas. Brandybuck High offered outdoor activities based on their practical programmes, and leadership qualities were seen to be developed through activities such as organizing the school ball. Hobbiton and Brandybuck also sought to provide opportunities for students to travel, opportunities that could involve both staff and students in long bus journeys.

For Aragorn, too, city trips to provide different experiences were important, as were sport and kapahaka.

Life skills were also seen as important for success in life after school. Teachers universally spoke of the need to help students find and critique information, ask questions, and develop resilience and the flexibility to deal with change. One Hobbiton High School teacher felt that success for some students would be developing sufficient perseverance to stay in a job for a year. An interviewee at Galadriel Girls' High defined success as "knowing who you are, knowing what you want to achieve, and knowing you've got the skills to get there." This was seen as challenging in a world where technology requires new skills, where social networking gives people little time alone to reflect. Life skills were also taught explicitly. Teachers linked the work to key competencies of the *Curriculum* document. For example, the practical engineering maintenance work for less-academic students at Gandalf College was designed to teach workplace discipline but also literacy (to read briefs and instructions), communication skills, and group collaboration. Financial literacy classes at Aragorn College for senior students unable to cope with NCEA Mathematics covered credit cards and hire purchase, understanding sales jargon, to protect students from loan sharks and to be able to recognise scams.

Above all, however, achieving success meant raising the aspirations and ambitions of their students, making them aware of their potential, of the need for academic excellence, of the importance of qualifications, of the possibilities of new careers. Here socio-economic and cultural differences were marked. Higher-decile Tolkien High and Gandalf College expected a high number of Scholarship examination successes and estimated that up to 90% of year 13 students moved on to tertiary study; Brandybuck High was delighted if a third of the year 13 class did so, though these numbers were increasing. Galadriel estimated that average academically oriented students could pass NCEA Level Two with merit and achieve at Level Three; Hobbiton estimated that 90% of students would leave with Level Two. But while individual students at Aragorn were high flyers, for many students passing Level One achievement standards in year 12 was a significant success.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate a great deal of commonality in teachers' discourse at our case-study schools and that the pedagogical rhetoric surrounding official education policy discourses was pervasive and normalized in teachers' responses. We found that teachers in all schools studied claimed to work towards raising the aspirations of their students and believed they were able to make a difference to their achievement and future life chances. All schools were working towards addressing the greater diversity among their student bodies, and saw success as much wider than academic achievement. At the same time we found that the context and institutional habitus of each school played a large part in determining how the discourse was worked through in practice.

Although teachers in all the schools spoke of the need to raise aspirations and help students achieve goals, in fact they were dealing with aspirations of students that

varied enormously. Higher-decile schools had an institutional habitus favourable to academic learning, although even here there were dissidents. The lower-decile schools had to work hard to convince students of the need to achieve and the importance of qualifications, literacy and numeracy in the world after school. Yet the individualism valued in higher-decile schools could work against the collaboration and integration valued in the key competencies and demanded in most workplaces.

While our study involved a small sample of schools, we are left in no doubt that context affects both discourse and practice in schools. In effect, what is illustrated here is the contrast between a generic implementation view of how schools "do" policy and a more context-related "enactment" perspective. Braun and colleagues (Braun et al., 2011), in a paper drawing on findings from the London-based Policy Enactments Project (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012), note that policy-makers tend to assume a best possible environment for "implementation" and argue that the job of researchers is to "disrupt this idealism" by introducing the reality of individual schools in specific contexts. Our case-study schools showed clearly that their contexts—student intake and resources in particular—played a major role in determining how they interpreted teaching discourses. This is in turn impacted on practice and the framing of aspirations.

In conclusion, we draw attention to three problematic issues around current schooling discourses. The first is complexity. Student-centredness, differentiation, involving students in planning, and personalised learning may sound deceptively simple, but they are all complex processes, requiring skilled and confident practitioners, and ongoing support for teachers to take risks. Schools need official recognition and acceptance that students will achieve goals at different rates yet our education system endorses societal expectations about the qualification levels students will attain at pre-ordained times. At the same time teachers are challenged to help students develop personal life skills which are difficult to measure. There needs to be a sophisticated awareness of this complexity.

A second issue is conflicting aims. Current discourses stress the need for learning to be scaffolded, for students to know the learning intentions of each lesson and how they fit into longer-term plans. This aim may conflict with the purposes of enquiry-based and student-centred learning where student needs dictate progress. If learning is pre-determined, as the rhetoric suggests, students may well have a sense of safety and security but this may work against innovation, creativity and risk-taking. Such risk-taking may be important in order to develop the resilience and self-management that are mandated in the *Curriculum* documents. Eisner (1969) suggested "expressive objectives" which allow exploration. By 2002 he had rejected the term "objective", because it too could imply a pre-determined goal, in favour of "expressive outcomes". "Expressive outcomes are the consequences of curriculum activities that are intentionally planned to provide a fertile field for personal purposing and experience" (Eisner, 2002, pp. 118–119).

The third issue concerns the speed with which schools are expected to implement policy. Schools in the study valued and budgeted for professional development of staff, and expected accountability. Teachers engaged with new ideas, reflected on practice, and made use of evidence. But some teachers also found that officially

mandated changes came too quickly, before they could evaluate the results of previous changes. The availability of Te Kotahitanga was seen by those schools involved as significant in enabling them to shift teaching approaches and become more culturally and personally responsive in their classrooms. But as one principal commented, change of this nature takes time and involves failures as well as successes. Often teachers who have taught well and delivered excellent outcomes flounder at first when they adopt new strategies which research tells them will be better. A longer-term strategy is needed.

The teachers and schools in our study were striving to implement a new curriculum and also find appropriate strategies to meet the learning needs of diverse students in particular contexts. They worked to find a balance between curriculum content and developing key competencies that was effective in their local situations. The success of their work must be measured, not only by external assessment results in national examinations (though these are necessary), but also by more nuanced and subtle means which take context into account. A key aim of the new curriculum is to enable students to develop respect for the views of others, and the skills to work collaboratively with them. Our society needs such skills but they cannot be measured by written examinations, or without consideration of context.

Official discourses on teaching and learning need to begin to reflect the complex and contextualised realities of teachers' work and allow for diverse ways to foster and measure progress. This does not preclude models of good practice for schools to follow. More research is likely to illustrate enough commonality in the practices adopted in schools with clusters of common contextual characteristics to provide guides to good practice. Our findings point to the need for such contextualised research in New Zealand schools and also for New Zealand policy-makers to avoid generic approaches, instead designing policies and interventions that have a better chance of fitting, and therefore succeeding, in particular kinds of school settings.

Correspondence

Martin Thrupp, email: <u>thrupp@waikato.ac.nz</u>

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