



# Schooling for Happiness

## Rethinking the Aims of Education

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### ABSTRACT

The release of *The New Zealand Curriculum* causes us to rethink the aims of education. Dr Cavanagh offers an alternative set of aims to the vision outlined in the Ministry of Education document, which is based, at least in part, on socialisation into the corporate industrial world. Dr Cavanagh's position is focused on putting relationships at the centre of who and what we are as schools. He believes if we create a culture of care in schools, students will be happy and flourish. As a result, the two major domains of schooling will be joined together – student behaviour and teacher pedagogy. This emphasis will help students and teachers to build their capacity to solve problems non-violently by learning how to build healthy relationships and heal broken relationships.

### Position Paper

#### Keywords

*Educational policy, inclusion practices, peer relationships, restorative practices, school culture, society, teacher student relationships.*

### SCHOOLING FOR HAPPINESS: RETHINKING THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others.

What does this tell us? It tells us that genuine happiness consists in those spiritual qualities of love, compassion, patience, tolerance and forgiveness and so on. For it is these which provide both for our happiness and others' happiness. (His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, 1999)

In November, 2007, Prime Minister Helen Clark and Minister of Education Chris Carter released *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). This document goes to the heart of the aims of education in New Zealand. Yet, in a democratic society the aims of education are not a given, to be imposed on educators by those in power. Those aims are continually up for reflection and discussion.

If we adopt a political agenda where the purposes of education cannot be questioned, we restrict schools to the technical role of delivering an education based on what works or what is effective, and do not allow each school

to answer the moral question of 'what is appropriate for these children in these circumstances?' (Biesta, 2007, p. 11). This article then is based on the idea that *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) is an empowering rather than a prescriptive document.

To understand the stance taken in this piece, I draw on the position taken in a recent article outlining a Māori worldview of the curriculum, noting that the 'differences in meaning and understanding should not be seen as sites of conflict, but rather as opportunities for improving and enriching the quality of education of all New Zealanders' (Macfarlane, Glynn, Grace, Penetito & Bateman, 2008, p. 123).

In the light of expanding the conversation about the aims of New Zealand education, it appears that one of the major goals of education presented in the curriculum is socialisation into the corporate industrial world by making our young people entrepreneurial. By way of explanation the New Zealand Conference of Catholic Bishops (2006) said, 'This "competency" has its home in the world of business ... On the other hand education should serve the "common good"' (p. 1).

Schools are encouraged to achieve this goal by giving students a bit of knowledge in a number of areas and specific knowledge about one or two fields, alongside training about how to be a good employee. The question we should ask is: "Is this the goal we want for our children?"

To answer this question we need to ask another question: "What are the aims of education?" Far too often today we talk about schools in terms of curriculum standards and testing rather than aims. We appear to be focused more on ways and means, rather than directions and aims.

### PUTTING RELATIONSHIPS AT THE CENTRE

Initially, let me establish a foundation for talking about aims. At a meeting of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, participants adopted Article 29, which states ...

Education needs to address the development of the child to his or her fullest potential and promote respect for human rights, the child's own culture, and the natural environment and to promote values of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship. In other words, education must not be limited to the basic academic skills of writing, reading, mathematics and science. (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007, p. 118)

At the heart of this article are relationships – building healthy and caring relationships with (a) our parents and people who share our cultural identity, language, values, and country of origin, (b) people from other cultures, (c) the land. These relationships are based on a belief in dignity, that each of us is born with inherent dignity that cannot be denied or taken away from us and is not dependent on our behaviour. This understanding of relationships forms the basis for how we relate to others as adults and as peaceful and non-violent people.

With this understanding, we can, along with our children, begin to examine whether our current societal aims and goals are appropriate for us, are fair to others and to the environment. Also, we can explore whether they will lead to improving the quality of life we are creating for ourselves, our children and grandchildren, and those who are yet to be born. Hopefully, schools will be places where our children can learn to critique and challenge the aims of society and our public leaders. Hopefully, schools will not be places to meet the aims and goals of policymakers, business people, and those who hold positions of power and wealth.

When students, educators and those interested in education enter into broader discussion of society's aims, they learn that not only are schools shaped by policymakers and others in power, but that schools have a moral duty to shape the aims of society. In this way, hopefully schools can be places for modelling what a tolerant and humane society looks like and acts by way of engaging, teaching, learning and valuing people who are different than the dominant culture.

My research supports this discussion about aims (Cavanagh, 2003a). This paper draws on research projects I was privileged to participate in, including my dissertation, Fulbright Fellowship, and current work as Senior Research Fellow for a research project focused on improving indigenous student achievement. My research is grounded in ethnography as the holistic study of schools as systems. My passion is exploring how we can create peaceful and nonviolent schools (Cavanagh, 2003b). I am pursuing that work by investigating how to create a culture of care, focused on building and maintaining caring relationships, where the theory of restorative practices underpins responses to problems related to student behaviour, and the theory of culturally appropriate pedagogy of relations underpins teacher and student relationships and interactions in classrooms. I have reflected on my research experiences over the past five years in writing this piece.

From my research I have come to realise that when the focus of education is on curriculum and testing, the importance of relationships is forgotten. From this perspective, the curriculum learning our children encounter needs to be grounded in human relationships, particularly as these interactions are lived out in classrooms. I have learned that a school can use the best curriculum, but if the relationships aren't right, the school can fail. Fundamentally, relationships must be central to the aims of education, for if we ignore relationships we suffer the consequences of such things as bullying and gang violence.

Teachers want to have effective interactions and relationships with students. After all, recognising and talking about relationships is at the core of schooling and who we are as educators. It is about treating children as treasures and recognising what a privilege it is to teach and learn with them.

I'd like to begin this discussion about the aims of education by considering what parents want for their children. Most of us would say that we want our children to be happy.

If this is true, then how can we turn these desires of parents into aims for education? As Noddings (2003) suggests in her book on *Happiness and Education*, at the present time we are focusing on financial aims in schools, educating students to support a strong economy and to be financially successful rather than to flourish as adults. We need to remember the key to what helps us to flourish is living happy and fulfilling lives. If we want our children to be happy and flourish as adults, then we need to ask them what makes them happy and what will help them to develop and achieve in an impressively successful way.

It is ludicrous for the media and policymakers to be criticising education, based on a financial purpose for schools, as being inadequate in a time of economic prosperity. How do they think the people who created and maintain this prosperity were educated? Rather, we celebrate our schools for their contribution to the wonderful lifestyle we enjoy today. After all, happiness and education are intimately connected, and education should contribute to the individual and collective happiness of all persons who are part of our schools: students, teachers, parents, educators, and those interested in education.

That is not to say we can't improve our schools. I recommend the place to start is by abandoning the notion that there is one best way to educate our children. However, we do not need two systems of education: one for the "normal" students and the other for those who are seen to not fit the criteria for a "normal" student (whether that labelling is the result of linguistic, cultural, or disabling conditions that mark a student as different). If we want our children to think inclusively as adults, then we need an inclusive education system that models inclusivity (Macfarlane, 2007). In addition, if we want our children to be happy and flourish as adults, we need to help students build healthy relationships and heal broken relationships.

My purpose isn't to criticise education and educators, rather to support their good work and urge them not to bow to pressures created by the media. Media tends to force blame for society's problems on schools. Based on my experience, teachers by and large get things right, and we don't want them to lose sight of the good things they are doing.

Noddings (2003) suggests that educators need to replace the emphasis on standards and testing with a focus on aims. She says resurrecting a focus on aims should include the ideas of people flourishing, developing competencies based on relationships in both our public and private lives, and shaping our worldviews and in turn our dispositions.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF CARE IN SCHOOLS

Noddings (2003) also explains that the combination of relationships and happiness are what lead to people flourishing. From my research I have learned that students are happy and flourish in an environment of care that focuses on relationships (Cavanagh, 2005). Such a culture of care is based on the idea of caring for and about others and responding appropriately to such care. In this culture, educators care for students as individuals and also care for their learning.

This culture has three elements:

1. Being in relationships by building healthy relationships.
2. Living in relationships by creating a sense of belonging or community.
3. Learning in relationships through routines, practices, and customs.

Being in relationships by building healthy relationships in schools is critical for our children to be successful in life. From our research we know that students can begin learning how to be peaceful and non-violent people in primary school and continue building this capacity throughout secondary school (Cavanagh, 2005).

Living in relationships happens when people live together in a sense of solidarity or all for all. We need community to meet our needs, particularly for recognition. If a school adopts a model based on how healthy families create loving homes, children will learn that caring is reciprocal. In that way students will feel welcomed, respected and comfortable at school (Noddings, 1992).

When we rely on practices and customs so students are learning in relationships about socialisation and norms of behaviour, then they will begin to understand the answers to “Who am I?” and “Who am I in this group?”. They will begin to think critically about what makes this group or school good? This thinking leads to children becoming reflective adults (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

In a culture of care, the response to wrongdoing and conflict must be one of restoration, particularly of relationships, rather than retribution. As an alternative to using coercion, particularly in the form of punishment, for example, name calling and labelling, controlling behaviour, and punishing students through detentions and stand downs, teachers need to help children learn how to repair broken relationships that are harmed through wrongdoing and conflict.

The culture of care I propose is the glue that holds together the two major domains of schooling – student behaviour and teacher practice. In a culture of care, student discipline is based on restorative practices, where the emphasis is on helping students learn how to solve problems non-violently by healing the harm resulting from wrongdoing and conflict, rather than punishment and retribution (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003). In classrooms that have a culture of care, teachers focus on creating healthy relationships with their students from the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I urge educators to persist in what they know in their hearts is right about education. My research supports them and also shows we do not lack caring teachers; what we lack are school systems that support caring educators. Furthermore, I would remind myself and others interested in education that this is a matter of great importance for everyone because ultimately focusing on relationships benefits the children entrusted to our care.

Educators and those interested in education understand that the task of education, first and foremost, is about the transmission of ideas of value more than facts. They support the desire for our children to understand and make sense of the world, not in a cynical or negative way, not dividing people into those that are good and those that are bad. Rather, it is important to honour the dignity of all persons and values happiness as being at the core of what helps us flourish as part of the natural world.

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