Comment on Schooling for Happiness: Rethinking the Aims of Education

Professor Ted Glynn
School of Education, University of Waikato

This commentary by Professor Ted Glynn is in response to an article published in the last version of Kairaranga – Schooling for Happiness: Rethinking the aims of education, written by Dr Tom Cavanagh.

It is refreshing to read Cavanagh's article which focuses our energies onto re-visiting the wider socio-cultural goals of education. The article tries to move our thinking beyond current concerns focused on accountability of teachers and students to meeting specific achievement standards and curriculum objectives. While these concerns are certainly appropriate and important, and deserve the careful attention they are now receiving from educational professionals and the media, Cavanagh's article reminds us that we may be losing sight of much of the wider educational picture.

We might be losing sight of the educational implications of the rapidly increasing diversity of social and cultural values, beliefs and practices within our student communitites and within our schools. This diversity is not well-reflected or represented in our pedagogies. There is a great deal of professional and media attention on the problems and challenges posed by all this diversity, and much anxiety about how and where we will find the knowledge and expertise to address the problems and challenges it presents. However, there seems to be little understanding and appreciation that both the knowledge and expertise are located within the diverse communities we are concerned about. We need to engage with this diversity in ways that are both affirming and responsive. We need to learn from it. We might learn, for example, that our educational aims and goals, particularly those concerned with equity and inclusion, are not as responsive to cultural and linguistic diversity as we think. Our students are presently in our schools not simply there to be "prepared" for a *future* life and learning *after* school, but to participate in shaping a happy, safe, and satisfying life and learning culture *here and now*. They are also there to learn how to understand, critique and challenge the values and practices of the society in which their schooling is embedded, and which has shaped the curriculum and pedagogies they experience.

Key pointers to increasing the responsiveness of our educational aims and goals are found in Cavanagh's pleas for the central positioning of caring, respectful and inclusive relationships within classroom and school learning communities. These are the kinds of relationships that enable students both to "engage" in learning and to "belong" within learning contexts that are safe and supportive. Relationships within effective classroom and school learning communities are characterised by the affirmation and inclusion of the different cultural and social identities and knowledge bases that students bring with them into their classrooms and schools.

Socially and culturally important goals such as creating inclusive learning relationships and inclusive learning communities, in my view, can be achieved when all teachers are willing and able to engage in "inclusive teaching" practices. Rather than continuing to worry about how on earth we could possibly become sufficiently knowledgeable and competent in the many different cultures represented in our classrooms and schools, we might instead try to collaborate with our students and their communities to create a new classroom and school culture where everyone is safe "to be who they are". Such a classroom culture would demonstrate collaboration in identifying preferred values and ways of learning, behaving, interacting, and of setting goals and defining learning tasks. Inclusive pedagogies in such classrooms would be those that respond to those collaboratively-defined values and preferences in ways that do not privilege any ethnic or cultural group, particularly the dominant group. Teaching practices might embrace, for example, collaborative learning, inquiry learning, reciprocal learning (where teacher and learner roles are interchanged freely among all participants) and holistic learning (where learning goals encompass intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing).

If more teachers, management personnel and policy makers made greater use of inclusive teaching practices, we might be able to leave behind our duplicity in "talking inclusion" while maintaining two separate systems of education, one "regular" for those who can meet our specific learning and behaviour standards and expectations, and the other "special" for those who cannot, or do not. For example, Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) were trained in accord with the Ministry of Education's 1996 inclusive policy for special education, *Special Education 2000,* in a distinctly "teacher support" role. RTLB are trained to understand learning and behaviour from an ecological perspective (which highlights the importance of learning "contexts" as well as teaching strategies). They are trained to collaborate with teachers and schools and assist them to improve learning and behaviour outcomes for students with special needs. However, a considerable number of RTLB

appear to have been relegated by their school and cluster management to work largely with individual students in a traditional withdrawal and largely exclusionary manner, which has little or no impact on the pedagogical values and practices of the rest of the school.

Inclusive education and inclusive teaching are not well served by resorting to exclusionary practices such as zero tolerance. I have a real fear that zero tolerance for challenging behaviour, for example, might pave the way towards zero care and zero responsibility. Our role as professional educators would be sadly diminished if our major strategic response to challenging behaviour were to become one of "crime and punishment". Tom Cavanagh's article leads us to think not just about defining specific curriculum aims and goals, and assessing students' progress towards these, but to think also about the nature of the classroom and school contexts we need to create, and the part that these contexts play in shaping learning and behaviour appropriate to those aims and goals. The article also provides us with a timely reminder to examine the short-term as well as the long-term goals we set for ourselves and for our students. We need to keep asking ourselves whether these goals represent and position us as educators who know and care about our students, who respect and affirm what our students already know, and who engage with our students to improve the effectiveness of classroom and school learning contexts.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Ted Glynn

Professor Ted Glynn

Ted is Foundation Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Waikato and a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. He has a wide background in applied behaviour analysis, inclusive education, and Māori and bilingual education. On his father's side Ted has whanaunga links with Ngāti Porou (Te Whānau a Rakairoa). Ted is a member of the Ministry of Education, Special Education, *Poutama Pounamu Education Research Centre* in Tauranga.

Email

glynn.ted@gmail.com