


① Tell a story:

② What's unique?

③ Credibility - why are you successful? 'I am amazing...'

④ Your target demographic?

⑤ Customer acquisition. How will you reach your customers?

⑥ Your competition 

⑦ Revenue - how will you make money? Inputs, Capital, cash flow

⑧ Projections
 - short
 - medium
 - long

⑨ Your team

⑩ Funding you need

THE THINGS WE LEARN

JOHN FOX

*I passed by the school where I studied as a boy
and said in my heart: here I learned certain things
and didn't learn others. All my life I have loved in vain
the things I didn't learn.*

“The School Where I Studied” by Yehuda Amichai (1999)

There's always a teacher you remember. The one like Rose Carruthers, who took a five year old me, by the hand. The one like Jo Barry, who encouraged me to blow the dust off my parents' Shakespeare book, and read it. The one like Craig Croft, who dished out press ups, lines, and confidence, and taught me Biology, and how to look the world in the eye. If we're lucky, we can close our eyes, and summon the moment: the one where we were understood, the moment we got it and threw it back, the conversation we were suddenly able to join, the moment the light went on.

That is education's priceless grace: the contribution it makes to people.

*It is not simply a matter of knowing things, and
being able to use them, or feelings and personal
growth. At its best, education shapes us as a
people, a form of social self-renewal.*

In our systems for the training of our children, we reveal the things we value, the things we aspire to, and the things we love. In education, too, we “draw out” the best in our young, joining their freshness and energy to the society in which they belong.

In this way, education assumes its true place, as the proving ground for the future, channelling, training, and disciplining youth

and exuberance, providing for our country's life. In this sense, the things we learn, and the future we hope for, go together.

It is for this reason that education is so often a political football. Continuing debates about school zoning, socioeconomic disparity, the performance of Māori and Pacific Islanders, boys education, NCEA, and myriad other challenges jostle for our attention. Underneath these debates, lie real parents, real families, and real social wounds, as well as differing versions of what we value, and what we think will help. There is broad consensus that, while our education system works very well for most, there is a “tail” of underachievement, comprising some of our most disadvantaged, and disconnected kids. Parliament's Education and Science Committee put it briefly and baldly in 2008, quoting the Education Review Office:

“New Zealand's best students perform with the best in other countries but there is a group at the bottom, perhaps as large as 20 percent, who are currently not succeeding in our education system.”¹

The lack of educational opportunity at the “tail” has brutal consequences, represented in crime statistics, social disconnection, health, and economic life. To put it simply: our country cannot afford to leave so many kids out in the cold. Tackling these realities is vital if we are to pass on to the next generation a New Zealand which works for everyone—even and especially those at risk.

New approaches such as Te Kotahitanga, which prioritises a model including Māori culture, emphasis on relationality, and reciprocity, are starting to begin the long process of a turn back to health.² But the most controversial new approach was launched by the government in 2013: Partnership Schools, or Kura Hourua. Popularly called “charter schools,” they marry up State money with community sponsors, in an effort to tackle underachievement. They’re the government’s latest attempt at catching the tail, and even though there are only a handful of them so far (the government have announced 11), they have the potential to do, and to be, beautiful creative work.

In reconnecting, learning, and innovating, they begin the kind of innovation we need to be brave enough to try.

Alwyn Poole reminds me of my old Rugby coach: in fact, in addition to teaching Economics, Maths, and Science, he was one himself.

With his wife Karen, he heads up Villa Education Trust or “VET,” an entity they began with their own money that now runs two Partnership Schools for Years 7-10: South Auckland Middle School (SAMS), and West Auckland Middle School. The model they use was developed in 2003 when they set up Mt Hobson Middle School, a small private school in Auckland. It’s a synthesis of research and “best practice:” low on excuses and what he calls “misplaced sympathy,” high on “engagement,” “work ethic, and care for people.” Mr Poole takes issue with the division of kids into the “able” and the “not,” and argues that that “any child given expert mentoring and teaching, significant purposeful practice, any kid, can develop

extraordinary skills.” While kids who already display high ability require extension and “have to use it or lose it,” he argues that the other, “normal” kids also have to have “expert coaching teaching and mentoring, in a supportive way, which will drive them towards purposeful work.” “Not every child will be the same, but every child can be coached. It might be a particular [area] they develop an interest in.” At these schools, every student has a learning plan, and expectations are high. “Convey that sense of belief in a practical way,” he says, and “extraordinary things happen.” It’s a message that seems to be getting through to the kids we spoke to.

Paris, 14, wants to join the military. She is hoping to go to Vanguard (another Partnership School, for Years 11-13) next year. She’s wanted to join the military for a while, since her brother tried to, but missed out due to failing grades. The difference, she says, is that she has a goal, and a plan to get there.

Josiah, 15, wants to be a politician. Half Tongan, he has always found school hard. Since joining South Auckland Middle School two years ago, he’s found he can achieve merits, or merits with excellence—something he never thought he was capable of in his last school. “I’ve learnt to work independently,” he says. “I’ve learnt I can rely on myself.”

The teacher quality at VET also comes in for high praise, with one student saying “the teachers here aren’t just teachers. They’re like mothers to us,” and another: “You can go to the teachers about anything, even about stuff at home. They’re not too busy for you.”

That personal touch, and that intensity of focus, is key to the VET approach. That sense of expectation, and that fostering of crucial confidence, makes a huge difference.



The kids have a split work day: intensive conventional classes from 8:30 to 12:50 in five subject areas (English, Maths, Science, Social Studies and Technology), with independent (but supervised) project work, and then the afternoon on sport, music, community service, and the arts. The curriculum is “integrated,” which means that the subject areas, the project work, and the afternoon activities are matched up. “So in Year 7, we do a unit on Architecture. Every project will have every learning area of the New Zealand Curriculum, and we have every strand of New Zealand Curriculum in the learning areas. [And we teach in an] Architecture context. In Maths class: angle geometry, 3D shape. In English, we look at the significant buildings in one major city, so a kid might look at New York: the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the World Trade Center, its social context and history. Then they do a visual presentation, 10 buildings that they like, with room for individual choice. So we might set them a Maths task to do with a properly symbolised house plan, and the kid is interested in ocean liners. So we change the plan to ocean liner. Sure, as long as it meets the strands...there’s room for individualised learning, freedom in form.” The curriculum combines traditional teaching, technology, and avowedly Christian values, such as Honesty, Compassion, Faith, Integrity, and Courage.

The VET model has smaller class sizes (they’re capped at 15) with an emphasis on engagement. Mr Poole puts it this way: “If [a teacher] gets a smaller class, and says “I can put my feet up,” [the research says there’s] no effect. If you say instead, “I can become a better teacher, I can bring more creativity, I can ask questions and bring the kids forward—a child can’t sit in a classroom and be a back seat customer. They have nowhere to hide. And we don’t want them to hide.”

VET schools also put a premium on family involvement, and on school culture. It works on two principles, Mr Poole explains: “As human beings we have extreme value. And every child has ability that can be developed. We don’t classify children by ability or background.”

“There are some things in their previous life and context we can’t do anything about, but there are many things we can change. Our job is to bring change in their life.”

This is a shared job, Mr Poole argues, between the kids themselves, the school management, and parents. “Parents need to be supportive, facilitative, encouraging. We invite them in. At SAMS we just had a New Parents Evening, and all but one of the new children were represented. We ring them up and say you’re expected to be there.” Uniform and stationery are free, the timetable is simple, and classroom discipline a priority.

Mr Poole is quick to say that many of these good things belong to lots of schools, but he clearly believes in his model, and his staff—welcoming ERO, commissioning his own evaluation, and calling for bracing honesty about the things that don’t work. The freedom of the Kura Hourua model allows kids who—for whatever reason—aren’t getting the quality of education they deserve, especially the “priority learners” at the tail, to come and give a new model of schooling a go:





“New Zealand is fourth in the prosperity index in the world. New Zealand is second in per capita wealth. There’s no excuse that the NZ European children are first in [the education ranking] PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), and Māori children are 35th. There is no excuse. We should be radically upset about that, on a daily and weekly basis, and any opportunity to bring about change should be grabbed with both hands.”

“We’re a world class education system, but we’re not for Māori and Pacific children. We should be upset about it, it’s a big deal.”

Mr Poole argues that every school should be open to recognising its failures, accountable to its stake-holders, and most of all, focused on the kids. He hopes SAMS might be a very small part of a much bigger change, away from horrific statistics, and towards real hope. Josiah agrees. When asked why he thinks Pacific and Māori people

are underemployed, he answers, simply. “A lot of older guys I know never experienced the education I am in, so they can’t get a job. No one will give them a break.”

The long term future of Partnership Schools is still under debate. Critics argue that the schools are overfunded (the Ministry says not),³ unnecessary, unwelcome, unaccountable, and a thousand other things. Evaluation and transparency will be key in putting these concerns to rest. Yet and still, we risk the future of our country when we fail to train, and to inspire our youth. Without them, there is no tomorrow. And without innovators who take the best advice and the best people, and dare to say “forward” in the face of all the odds, we have no future either. The future of our country, and our children, depend on the choices we make—and the courage we have to make them. It’s that vital sense of courage, and that vital investment, we must begin to make now. •

John Fox teaches in the Department of English at the University of Auckland. He is also a volunteer literacy tutor, and a trustee of Elevate, the Christian disability Trust. A former Senior RA in a student Hall of Residence, Venn Foundation lecturer, private tutor and Sunday School teacher, teaching is in his blood, despite happening in large part by serendipity and grace. When not complaining about the Things Wrong With the World, he can sometimes be found trying to fix them.



NOTES:

- 1 Enquiry into Making the Education System Work for Every Child, Report of the Education and Science Committee, February 2008, 7-11. Available at http://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-nz/48DBSCH_SCR3979_1/383847d373839d321e886e1754d8378732ad69e6 (Accessed 5 November 2015).
- 2 See Bishop, R., et al., Te Kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Māori students in New Zealand, Teaching and Teacher Education (2009), doi:10.1016/j.tate.2009.01.009, 1-9.
- 3 State and Partnership Schools Funding: The Facts. Available <http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Initiatives/Partnership-schools/StatePartnershipSchoolsFunding.pdf> (Accessed 5 November 2015)