What educational reform means: lessons from teachers, research and policy working together for student success

Airini · Stuart McNaughton · John Langley · Pale Sauni

Received: 9 February 2007 / Revised: 17 March 2007 / Published online: 20 June 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract This paper describes education reform projects designed to bring about major improvements in school and tertiary student outcomes. Individually the projects illustrate characteristics of educational reform in local contexts for primary, secondary and tertiary education. In combination they signal key components essential to getting large scale high-quality school and tertiary education cultures geared to student success.

Keywords Education reforms · School outcomes · Tertiary outcomes · Student achievement

1 Introduction

In many settings across the globe educational reform has been about compliance and top-down reform. This paper suggests that educational reform is not linear, but a continual process of constructing meaning — as learner, teacher, leader and within a range of organizations. The key to effective education reform is the improvement in relationships among all involved.

This paper describes projects designed to bring about major improvement in school and tertiary student outcomes. Individually the projects will illustrate characteristics of educational reform in local contacts. In combination they will signal critical components...
essential to getting large scale high-quality school and tertiary education cultures geared to student success.

For the past 4 years we have been working in projects across New Zealand aimed at improved literacy. We will report on aspects of this work aimed at long-term education reform through policy–research–practice collaboration. The collaboratively designed interventions have resulted in significant improvements in primary school student literacy achievement.

Educational reform in New Zealand secondary education has included understanding the future. This planning method means that greatest attention is paid to those issues that will assume importance in 5, 10, 15 or 20 years time, rather than those immediately present. We will discuss what we are learning in relation to the characteristics of educational reform when focusing on secondary school futures.

From 2001 to 2005 the reformation of outcomes for underrepresented and underachieving students in tertiary education has been targeted. We will describe a project undertaken in a university setting focused on improved student success rates for teacher education students of Pacific Nation heritage. The importance of personality and innovation in teaching, alongside research and organisational learning were evident in achieving improved student success.

Each section of the paper describes a number of components essential in getting large scale high-quality school and tertiary education cultures geared to student success. By describing characteristics of educational reform this paper sets the scene for future possibilities when research, policy and practice work together for student success.

2 What ‘educational reform’ means

There is much about ‘educational reform’ that is exciting, applied, knowledge-based, knowledge-bearing and transformational. ‘Educational reform’ in this sense means the removal of faults and the drive for education outcomes to be better. In all cases the intention is that educational reform should lead to the very best opportunities for learners, and advancement in local and global communities.

The evidence nationally and internationally, however, shows that educational reform is not achieving great outcomes for all. As discussed previously (Airini et al. 2006) in New Zealand for example, educational failure is still happening amongst the same population groups in schools and tertiary education. The partnership among universities, schools and government is not working well enough to affect national education reform for all (ibid).

International data indicates differences in what aspects of educational reform are needed within countries. The PISA (OECD 2001) results suggested that in New Zealand some but not all 15-year-old students are able to apply their learning well in science, reading and mathematics. Analyses show that New Zealand is producing world-class students while at the same time being one of the few Western countries in which the bottom twenty percent of students are systematically falling behind (Hattie 2003). Māori (indigenous peoples) learners and Pasifika (Pacific Nation heritage) learners dominated this group and were disproportionately represented in what has come to be known as ‘the tail’ of student achievement. As shown in Fig. 1, New Zealand’s education system could be described through international measures in 2001 as ‘high quality, low equity’. By 2005 Māori and Pasifika continued to be underachieving in national assessment measures. Boys in particular were poorly represented in success figures. In 2005 43% of Pasifika boy school leavers finished secondary school with no qualification; and 53% of Māori boy school leavers had the same outcome (Ministry of Education 2006). This contrasts with 80% of Pakeha (European heritage) boy school leaver population finishing secondary school with a qualification. Further educational reform

Springer