

## Taking a future-focus: A personal response to review of TLRI school-sector projects, 2003–2012

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### Introduction

This is a personal response to the review of all the school-sector TLRI projects completed between 2003 and 2012 (Hill & Cowie, 2012). The response is constructed from the perspective of secondary school issues and interests. There is so much in the review that could potentially inform a response but the word limit necessitated a purposeful focus. Rather than try to address every challenge or question raised in the review, I have framed my response from the perspective of a concern about what we *mean* when we say that education should take a future-focus.

I think this challenge is important for several reasons. First, taking a future-focus is one of eight New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) principles that should act as a “foundation for curriculum decision-making” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9) and therefore be of central importance to enhancing student *learning*, which is the broad aim of the TLRI programme of work. ERO has recently expressed concern that this principle, along with that of curriculum coherence, is least in evidence in schools (Education Review Office, 2012). Furthermore, a recent synthesis of empirical evidence and future-focused theoretical thinking suggests that our current reading of what taking a future focus might mean is too narrow and bound by 20th century schooling practices (Bolstad et al., 2012).

My second reason is more research-facing, as befits a discussion of a research programme. For some years now I have worried about the limitations of evidence-based change as the only (or most) defensible basis for shaping and adopting new directions. To what extent does a focus on what we *already know about* keep us trapped right there? In an equivalent commentary on tertiary TLRI projects, Nik Huntington asked if the programme is “actually *building* cumulative knowledge, or whether it is simply *adding* to knowledge” (Huntington, 2012, p. 4, emphasis in the original). I take this distinction to be between incremental additions to already established programmes of research (important as these might be for now) and opening up new spaces where we might re-imagine educational futures in the face of the complex and intractable issues facing our world (Bolstad et al., 2012; Facer, 2011).

With this challenge in mind, the following sections respond to the review in different ways. The next section outlines evidence that the TLRI programme of work in secondary schools appears to assume that an “orthodox” education (Facer, 2011) will *adequately* prepare students for the futures they face, as might have been the case in the 20th century. (Facer calls this approach

“future-proofing”.) The third section then looks at some gaps the reviewers noticed in the overall programme, and asks how significant these might be from the perspective of one recently published set of future-focused principles for changes in schooling (Bolstad et al., 2012). The fourth and final section looks forward to the review symposium, drawing together questions for possible discussion. What, if anything, could we, and should we, do in response to the challenges outlined? Are there potential strengths in TLRI that could be more strategically leveraged to address the challenge of supporting our young people to be “future-builders”?<sup>1</sup>

### Evidence of an orthodox curriculum focus (“future-proofing”)

The review noted that a focus on mathematics and literacy dominated for those TLRI projects that could be explicitly linked to the curriculum (Hill & Cowie, 2012). There was an imbalance between primary and secondary schools: 11/14 mathematics projects were secondary-based, but only 2/11 literacy projects. Arguably, the emphasis on two “core” curriculum areas reflects high-stakes traditional achievement concerns, and the secondary domination in mathematics reflects its status as a “gatekeeper” subject to many traditional learning pathways both through and beyond secondary school.

The reviewers note the current policy emphasis on achievement in literacy and numeracy, and also the lack of “standardised achievement measures” (p. 21) outside these two areas. Given the “ubiquity of progressions discourse” (p. 29) in the international context, they note the opportunity afforded by these TLRI projects to use research as a robust basis for informing the ongoing structuring of progressions. Obviously it is helpful to support both teachers and policy makers in these two areas that so dominate current thinking. However, I wonder about the extent to which the TLRI imperatives of conducting *strategic* research, and providing *robust evidence of learning gains*, both serve to reinforce a focus on these traditional curriculum areas and their “future-proofing” role in students’ overall intellectual development. I do not mean to imply that such learning is not *important*. Rather, my question is whether it is *sufficient* with *future-building* purposes for learning in mind.

There appeared to be no exclusively secondary science, technology or environmental education projects, and only four in the latter area in total. This is telling, given that environment education is, by its very nature, future-focused and oriented to building *action competence* (Sterling, 2001). There were no secondary arts projects as far as it is possible to tell and no projects at all in health, PE, social sciences (and presumably languages, although the review does not mention this learning area). I also found it telling that not one of the school-sector TLRI projects took as a main focus the far-from-settled question of how the NZC key competencies might act to change teaching and learning right across the curriculum. This question is clearly of strategic importance, given research-based evidence that schools need support to integrate the key competencies into

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<sup>1</sup> Facer uses this term to describe educating students to build the agency and action competencies needed to meet their futures proactively, helping by their participation to shape all our futures, not just passively accepting and adapting to whatever socio-technical change may come (Facer, 2011).

the learning areas (Cowie, Hipkins, Keown, & Boyd, 2011). What, I wonder, has discouraged research in this important area to date?

All of these gaps point to lost opportunities to develop a wider range of insights about the types of learning outcomes we might value, in addition to those pertinent to traditional academic learning. Indeed, Hill and Cowie make this point succinctly:

These findings raise issues of what counts as learning, the scope of the learning that we value and are interested in, and how to document or make this learning visible and communicable to learners and others. (Hill & Cowie, 2012, p. 24)

## What might be different in a future-focused framing?

A recent review of existing future-focused literature and research pointed to six emerging principles which serve to underscore the absence of a future-focus in the overall mix of TRLI school-sector projects. Three of the principles challenge traditional assumptions about relationships between teaching and learning:

- *Learning should be personalised.* The “logic” of the system is reversed so that learning programmes are built around the specific learning needs of the student rather than requiring them to fit into the existing system and predetermined curriculum knowledge.
- *Roles and relationships between teachers and learners need to be restructured.* Teachers work with students to draw out and develop the strengths and interests that students bring to their learning.
- *Ideas about equity and diversity need to be rethought.* Instead of a problem to be managed in the interests of offering an equitable education to all students, diversity should be seen as a learning resource to be fostered and working with diversity as an important outcome of learning (Bolstad et al., 2012).

With these three principles in mind it is telling that the majority (43/49) of the curriculum-based projects had a focus on *teaching* rather than learning per se, and teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) was a common inquiry focus. As Hill and Cowie note, greater pedagogical content knowledge can build teachers’ confidence and awareness, enabling them to be more responsive to learner needs (p. 30). I am not suggesting that new knowledge in these areas is not important, but again my question is whether it is *sufficient* to prompt the sorts of shifts in focus signalled in the future-focused literature. It is also pertinent to note here that just 6/49 projects had an explicit focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, and as far as it is possible to tell from the summaries, only one of these was a secondary school project. Furthermore, only one of these six projects gave a clear explanation of what cultural responsiveness might look like in practice (p. 34). Overall, then, I wonder if the cumulative *pedagogical* knowledge being built across these curriculum-based projects might keep us “right where we are” rather than moving the field of secondary education forward.

A fourth principle from the future-focused review points to another gap:

- *Strong school–community connections need to be fostered* because the support of many others is needed if students are to be offered the sorts of authentic learning experiences that build competencies (capabilities) for life beyond school. At the same time, communities need to understand and value the sorts of shifts that schools are attempting to make (Bolstad et al., 2012).

Projects related to culturally responsive pedagogy, along with several others that addressed specific types of learner needs (e.g., English as an additional language) “highlighted the need to connect whānau/families and the community with school learning” (Hill & Cowie, 2012, p. 35). This lone passing reference serves to highlight an overall absence of research that explicitly addresses the challenge of engagement between families and schools.

A fifth principle, in combination with those already outlined, points to another gap in the programme:

- *Rethinking the role that knowledge plays in learning*: It is no longer sufficient to absorb and reproduce existing knowledge; students need to develop their capabilities to work with disciplinary knowledge to create new knowledge that addresses specific real-world issues and challenges (Bolstad et al., 2012).

Information technologies have an important role to play in bringing this principle to life. They can connect students to real-world issues and authentic knowledge-building activities, and extend their learning opportunities well beyond the bounds of the school infrastructure and timetabled day. From a future-building perspective, students need support to make constructive use of the current “flourishing of informal learning through digital cultures, the easy networking of folk educators” (Facer, 2011, p. 133). Facer further suggests that students need support to reach out and establish appropriate, rich community networks, in contrast to the traditional instinct of keeping students safely separated from the vagaries of the adult world during the school day. What sorts of learning outcomes (including but not limited to those from traditional learning areas) might support students (and via networks, their families) to be critical and discerning in their use of this vast resource of widely varying reliability?

It seems unlikely that the current mix of TLRI projects would have much to say to this important challenge. Just six projects with an ICT focus have been completed in the school sector so far, and only one of these is specifically set in the secondary school. Furthermore, even these projects appear to have addressed the use of ICT for more effective (orthodox?) teaching and learning.

The sixth and final future-focused principle points to an interesting TLRI opportunity rather than a gap:

- *A culture of continuous learning is fostered for everyone*: Teachers’ needs as adult learners are also appropriately addressed, so that they are well supported to address the changes implied in the other five principles.

Notwithstanding earlier uncertainties about the role of teacher-partners in TLRI research (Hill & Cowie, 2012) the *partnership model* clearly has the potential to support the type of challenging adult learning envisaged by this principle. Hill and Cowie note the obvious impact on teaching practice for the teachers involved, and the important opportunity to embed practice knowledge in any new assessment/observation tools developed during the research. However, they also point to a lack of systematic wider dissemination of the research findings (p. 31) and the lack of evident impact on policy (no traces of these projects on TKI, or in the *Gazette* etc.). Clearly, these are important issues to address, but in the light of what I have already outlined I would expand this challenge. My suggestion is that we discuss how to make even more powerful use of the partnership feature itself. This model could open up new types of learning spaces where the theoretical expertise of the researchers and the rich practice knowledge of the teachers can be brought together to solve pressing and challenging issues that neither party can effectively address alone.

## How might TLRI respond to the challenge of future-building?

In her book *Learning Futures*, Keri Facer outlines likely and already predictable directions for what she calls socio-technical change: the good, the bad and the downright scary. She differentiates between “future-proofing” and “future-building”, with the latter supporting students to meet their futures proactively, helping by their participation to shape all our socio-technical futures, not just passively accepting and adapting to whatever may come. This seems to me to be an especially cogent issue for the secondary school sector, given that these are our young people’s final years at school. I have responded to the review of the school-sector TLRI projects with this challenge in mind.

Summarising my observations and wonderings, I conclude with three interrelated challenges that it might be profitable to discuss during the TLRI forum.

### **Directed focuses vs. personal research agendas**

Nik Huntington also highlighted this challenge in his commentary on the review of the tertiary TLRI projects. I have noted *gaps in the secondary sector projects*, and pointed to some reasons why it could be important to develop projects in these areas. My reasons relate to future-focused challenges but there will doubtless be other ways of framing the significance of these gaps (e.g., from an equity perspective). The question is should we be more directive, and if so, how? Or will personal interests eventually catch up with these currently neglected challenges if we leave well enough alone?

### **Expanding what counts as evidence of learning while maintaining robust knowledge-building methods**

Although TLRI has an explicit focus on learning, the overall programme to date does not appear to have unsettled orthodox views of what might count as *evidence of learning*. To what extent does the emphasis on presenting robust evidence of learning perpetuate a focus on traditional outcomes, given that this is where research tools are more readily accessed and progression is

(arguably) better understood? Could/should TLRI be more proactive in opening up research-informed conversations about other types of outcomes/other types of evidence? Indeed, should we be more explicit about what learning *is* (as Bolstad and her colleagues did in their future-focused report)? Can we foster an expanded focus that encompasses future-focused concerns about learning without also shifting our view of methodologies that can build robust evidence of learning?

### **More powerfully leveraging partnership opportunities**

How do we build powerful and useful new knowledge for uncertain futures where no-one yet knows just what to do? (Barnett, 2004). Can we support teachers and students to proactively take learning to this challenge (future-building) rather than waiting to respond once the future has come to us, for good or ill? It seems to me that the learning needed here cannot rely on individual thinkers and researchers, no matter how influential. The very best or research-informed insights and cutting-edge pedagogical knowledge need to be brought together to address future-focused challenges. This is the *promise* of a partnership model but how do we ensure that promise can actually be realised in practice?

### **In conclusion**

Keri Facer describes change that seeks to “retool” existing schools—without changing our fundamental assumptions about the work they should do—as being like “strapping wings onto a caterpillar” (Facer, 2011, p. 134). To continue the metaphor, what might transform our secondary schools and students from ever-expanding caterpillars (growing fat on provided knowledge) into butterflies with strong functional wings that allow them to transcend and transform whatever the future brings? I think there is an urgent moral imperative behind this question. Should TLRI embrace the challenge, and if so, how?

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