

Bali Haque conversation

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Transcript

Derek Wenmoth

Tēnā koe, Bali it's great to have you here. And thanks for just taking the time to have a chat with me today. A man of your vast experience and wisdom, it's not often I get a chance to hear some thoughts from you. But look, for people who may be unfamiliar with you, maybe you'd like to give us a quick synopsis of your background and education.

Bali Haque

Thanks, Derek. And thanks for the invite. I really appreciate the opportunity to have a conversation and all the great work you've been doing. My background, basically, I've been an educator all my life, literally, I started teaching economics and accounting. I knew nothing about accounting when I started. So that was the path of the course in those days. And really through that, you know, usual track, head of department, deputy principal at Spotswood College, then I did three principalships at Tamatea High School, Hawkes Bay, and I did an executive working with Karen Potasi, who was wonderful, who got on things. And then really with responsibility for NCA and the development of NCA in conjunction with a ministry such as it was in those days, and then on to three years of work in Cook Islands, the Rarotonga at the National College as principal there. And then came back and was asked by Chris Hipkins to lead the task force around the review of tomorrow schools, which took a couple of years, and, you know, and the rest is history. As they say. I came back, I actually got elected as a local government, a new premise district counselor just on three years there, which was a new career altogether, which was fun. We could talk about that sometime.

Derek Wenmoth

I'd like to pick up on your time with NZQA really because I've been doing a bit of thinking and reading in the background and the conversations that are going on at the moment about NCEA which you were deeply involved with kind of dominating a lot of thoughts

and from my perspective when I'm thinking about the future of education that whole area of how we measure success what what our measures of success and therefore what our assessment process might be and for a while you know New Zealand had an outstanding reputation in terms of the the track we were going down. I'd be curious to hear your thought about how NCEA and its and its concept you know the conceptual idea about NCEA was driving us towards you know a future focused view of education and perhaps you know where we why we're where we are now.

Bali Haque

I mean, it's fascinating, isn't it? The wheel goes round, the pendulum swings, we're in the middle of a swing back, I think. But yeah, the original, you know, when people were talking about NCA, you know, originally, you may not remember, but the concept was a national framework, which was based on unit standards, all competency based, and no distinction made between vocational so called, and curriculum, academic so called. And the vision was that schools and tertiary institutions would build appropriate programs, there would be trust in schools, and we would have a record of learning, which would then demonstrate to employers and whoever, you know, what would have been learned and achieved. So that was the concept. And that flexibility was key to that, because we had come out of a system where the school certificate university bursaries was under intense, intense criticism for the gatekeeping it did, and the fact that it left half the population often out. So, you know, we're going to remember those times to see where NCA sort of kicked in. So I think that's the concept was great. I think, you know, I'm always that whole business about implementation, I think we underestimate implementation issues. So we know that that that didn't go well. But fundamentally, I think, you know, the two things come out in my conversation, my thinking about the development of NCA was one, that the tension between the ministry and NZQA, and the failure to have a coherent connection between curriculum and assessment, which drove so many problems, I think, I can talk about the literacy one later, which is an interesting. And the other one, I think, is this constant tension we have between the so-called vocational pathway and the academic curriculum pathway, and that parity of esteem issue, which I think is has been a real problem for many years, and I think, in a way, an igniter for the current, the current drive to do away with NCA because people can't cope with that sort of spread. That's sort of a brief observation in terms of what happened.

Derek Wenmoth

My eldest daughters were at school at the time that NCA was introduced. And I must say, I saw in them and for them, because they were quite independent thinkers, I suppose, they flourished, they loved the opportunity to, to be able to not just sort of

engage in different ways and have their learning recognized in different ways. But actually, what I think what they really enjoyed, particularly my second eldest daughter, she, she loved the fact that there was transparency in what was being assessed, and she could take responsibility for seeing how she was progressing and set her own goals around that mural in excellence, you know. But I think picking up on part of what you were saying there, that idea of where we're at now, that idea of the assessment in a sense driving what we do in education and the point you made about vocational stuff. I mean, I've got a little slide that I've used for years in my presentations around, you know, the origins of schooling being preparing you for a job, you know, if you work hard at school, then you'll get a job and you'll be secure. And I guess, for me, that's always been an implicit and not always explicitly recognized driver, you know, we send our kids to school, so they'll get well educated and have a job. It seems to me that the world is so incredibly different and dynamically changing now, that having that certainty about what that will be, no longer exists. So when we're thinking about the future, NCEA preparing for that, that must have been a strong driver at the stage that you were involved, that you're creating a much more flexible open system that not only prepared people for the things we could see in the future, but the things that we couldn't see as well.

Bali Haque

Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, the vocational stuff. It's interesting, isn't it? That it is how it is. It's how you learn in a sense. And I think one of the things about the the vocational pathways were was and the parity of esteem idea was that you could you it was perfectly reasonable to go down a pathway where, you know, you do some, you know, you do a vocational based course, but come out come out of it with a record of learning, which is as valuable as somebody doing, you know, the traditional curriculum based subjects. And I think that that's important because it's the how you learn bit that I think we get into trouble with that we we assume that all our children are going to going to learn better sitting in classrooms doing traditional subjects, rather than there are various ways of of including children in their education. And we've failed miserably over the years to do that well.

Derek Wenmoth

You've just made me think a little bit about how we learn. We've talked a lot about lifelong learning, you know, that learning doesn't stop. It's not just something you do before. And I've had a little bit to do in recent years with the Big Picture schooling organisation, which have as a key part of their focus internships. And often people flip back and they'll think, well, an internship is just sort of like work experience, you know, in the workplace. But actually, these young people who go on these internships within the

big picture framework are having experiences that are learning experiences in different sorts of vocational areas. But an interesting thing that I pick up as I've talked to some of these young people and talked in the workplaces as well as, of course, they're not just experiencing something, I guess, let's take for an example, hairdressing. You know, I go and learn, here's the techniques becoming a hairdresser. But actually, when you get in there, you find that those people are actually learning all the time. There are new products, new services, new health issues, new things. So learning is actually an integral part of their job. And that issue about how we learn becomes fundamentally important to how we take our place in the modern workforce.

Bali Haque

I mean, outdoor education, if you put it right into the debate about outdoor education is a really good exemplar, I think, of the problem that we have that, you know, in the end, people who outdoor education are, well, who cares? It's basically a bit of camping and this. But actually, when you unpeel it, it's so many people have come out and said that, I mean, I didn't end up an outdoor education career. But boy, that provided me with a whole pile of learning, which I've, which I've treasured all my life.

Derek Wenmoth

Yes, well, you're talking to an ex Outward Bounder and outdoor education instructor and strongly believe that you're right, because although there aren't hundreds and hundreds of careers in outward outdoor ed, it's those issues of facing challenge, being impelled into experience to use the outward bound motto, they stand you in good stead, don't they? I think one of the things that for me is really important in this is that, I guess the external assessments, you know, you talked before about the pressure to do away with NCEA, we've been under pressure for some years with some of these, you know, global measurements, you know, that it's easy for parents, educators and our politicians, of course, to pick on them. And where do you see some of the big pressures here that we need to be thinking differently about? Because it's easy to be knee jerk, isn't it? We see literacy rates falling. Okay, so let's put something in place. It's more complex than that, surely.

Bali Haque

Yeah, isn't it? I mean, you know, this Derek, but it's funny, you know, I was thinking about just talking with you and I was thinking, Oh, gosh, you know, what do I know? And it struck me that we do complicate our lives, don't we, in the education system that I flick

back to, you know, this this notion of what was called constructivism in my day. Yeah. And then it turned into the co constructivism, which is, I mean, basically, as I understand it, it was actually if you're a teacher, then you start with where the child is at and you and you build from there. Right. So, it seems to me that that whole conversation about, you know, a one size fits all, which is where we're going in terms of this is, this is what you need to learn this is where you need to learn it by. This is how you're going to learn it flies in the face of what we know about good teaching and learning and that's that's thing that's really annoying me about what's going on at the moment that we, we, it is the easy fix as you say that that is the populist notion to. And I've got to say that I'm full of admiration for the ministry in many ways, I disagree with so much of what she's doing, but what she has, she's got she's picked a simple idea. And she has put together in the system right from the ministry through era through through the teaching counselor she's lined up all the ducks to fulfill those narrow aims, and I think that's probably, you know, I hate to see it happen but it's very powerful. And it's something I think that is much more difficult to achieve when you actually understand the complexities of teaching and learning because you can't. It's not that easy to line everything up. And that's where the problem I think lies.

Derek Wenmoth

Do you think that's perhaps a consequence, an unintended consequence of the Tomorrows Schools regime where we gave much greater autonomy to schools but it's kind of, instead of necessarily empowering them to see themselves as part of the system and kind of how they might work with each other, they've become intensely isolated to an extent, yeah.

Bali Haque

Yeah, I think that's yes, you know, the the two and a half thousand islands of autonomy, the whole concept of subsidiarity, I think we've been toying with for a long time in terms of where the decision-making power lies. And, you know, in 1989, we decided that it should be with boards of trustees and we would make those decisions as close to schools and kids as possible. And we know the result of that is that those connections that, you know, that we talked about and Kathy White talks about in our reports, they get shredded in that process. One of these goes back to 2016, I found what's called the state services commission in those days, the public, I think it's called the Public Services Commission or something now. Anyway, the staff looks after all the state enterprise. They did a bit of a work on education, the education system and the stewardship of the education system. And it's in our report and what they said, I'll read it. It says, we found the adoption of good practice almost always referred to as this is in the system was

always referred to as patchy. And the uptake of promising innovation is seen as slow to spread across the system. And that's the that's the autonomy of schools where we believe schools to do their thing and we end up system wide, not having the connections to actually make those improvements spread through. So I always get I always get slightly annoyed when when you get a report in the paper saying such and such principle has turned around such and such a school because almost inevitably, over a period of time that peters out and the system just carries on. So I think that that that tomorrow, you know, what we were trying to do with the tomorrow's school report was to is to connect up the system. And we can go into that in some more detail.

Derek Wenmoth

Yeah, that's definitely where I'd like to go, but I'm focused a little bit on what you're talking about the minister and your view of her providing, you know, a clear focus. And I guess one of the things that's being talked about for some time now is, you know, the need for strong and decisive leadership within our education system. It's been a criticism for some time. And the other thing is, I guess, the thing that this particular minister has focused on, you know, picking on numeracy and literacy, for example, no one's going to argue that those are still and remain fundamental to our way of working and the preparation for students going into the future. I guess I'd be interested in your thoughts about then, you know, so what are we doing that in terms of the current approach to that, what are we doing that could be done differently or needs to be done differently? Because it seems that we're getting a very polarized kind of opinion out there at the moment.

Bali Haque

You mean on the literacy and numeracy in particular?

Derek Wenmoth

Yes, that in particular.

Bali Haque

Yeah, it's interesting. The history of this is, this is interesting. And I refer to the MOE NDQA stuff around literacy. If I could go back a bit, one of the interesting things about the literacy requirements for an NCEA, just go back to that for a moment, was that when

we were reviewing the NCEA, we thought that one way of doing the checking on literacy and numeracy for NCEA was not to have a test or online this, but actually through the ability of students to get an achievement standard, or several achievement standards, which were literacy rich or numeracy rich. And the idea was that we would select a range of standards, a limited range of standards, where it might be geography or it might be history or it might be outdoor education, which would enable the student to demonstrate they have literacy. And at NZQA, we said, well, let's just understand and let's select us. We thought six, 10 standards, which, if a student achieved, would demonstrate their literacy skills. That's where we wanted to go. And what happened was the ministry then picked that up. And instead of six or 10, it turned into almost hundreds of standards, torpedoed the whole idea. So what I'm trying to say is that if it seems to me, if we're interested in literacy and numeracy, we should be looking at the outcomes across the curriculum. So students are able to demonstrate those rather than pulling through a testing regime, which is really what we're at at the moment. So from my perspective, what we were looking for is that focus on literacy and numeracy, as we know, will end up excluding other stuff. It will narrow the curriculum. And I suspect now what we're going to get is an industry of people providing resources and support for literacy and numeracy. And it's going to turn into this big machine. And then in time, we will come back to it and say, well, that's not working. And we'll find something new. And I think that's the problem. We're always looking for new toys rather than looking at the expanse of what we're trying to achieve. In our curriculum and finding really good ways to assess it. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's wrong.

Derek Wenmoth

No, it does. And I guess what's resonating for me is back to something you said earlier about the constructivism regime that you recall. And certainly that when I trained, you know, John Dewey's constructivist approach was quite strongly influential in the way that I thought about becoming a teacher. And so when I encounter concept around the science of learning, for example, I will always think about John Dewey's work as a theorist, that the science behind that is that we construct meaning from our experiences and build it up. Whereas we seem to be, you know, at loggerheads with competing views of what that science of learning now means, particularly if you take literacy down in the junior school where we know literacy and numeracy have both been a struggle in many contexts, they're sort of being just glossed over or maybe not addressed as seriously as they might. But now we've got this kind of almost the drill and kill regime coming back again, which is, as John Hattie once said to me, you know, very effective, you know, any intervention will work and have an impact on the short term. All right. But what makes it sustainable? What builds the qualities in people to take that forward? So when you're talking about the literacy stuff from the NZQA perspective, which I was teaching and lecturing right through that period, and, you know, found it to be a good

idea, we seem to be at a point now where we're almost just taking teachers out of the equation and just hoping a formula is going to do the job for us.

Bali Haque

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's what come back to simplicity, I suppose that I sort of I think as you get older, maybe, maybe I just, maybe I'm just oversimplifying, but goodness me, you know, let's just, let's just train good teachers. Let's just start with focusing on the teacher intake. Let's focus on leadership of schools and the system. Let's, let's provide a flexible curriculum, which enables teachers to do that constructivism thing. And magic will happen. Like, I mean, is that hard. What we're doing at the moment is sort of deep professionalizing our teachers, we're acting rather like a country that's starting an education system where you need to be, you need to say this is what you need to teach this is when you teach it this is how you teach it and hear the resources, because you don't have a professional teaching. Yeah, you don't have that sort of concept. We sort of do, I think we're losing it. I think we're deep professionalizing our teachers. I think one of the reasons that lots of teachers are not so negative about what's happening around the curriculum is because they see that they see. It's easier. And, and, and the workload is high, so we want to reduce it. But actually what it is doing, you know, in five or 10 or 15 years, we are going to be in a position I suspect we're teaching workforce is going to be more challenged than it is now because we're not doing the literacy or the science of this and we're going to do its way. And the minister comes across and he comes to to the party with these amazingly odd, difficult, I might say dishonest summaries of how successful the reform is after 12 weeks. Yeah, it's bonkers. So I just, and the profession I suppose right now is, it's almost like we're so polarized now, because there is that group of teachers and principals who see this is a good thing it's simple, it can be achieved it can be done. And there's another group of schools and teachers who who can see some of the difficulties ahead and boy, it's very very dangerous stuff I think.

Derek Wenmoth

Yeah, I think we are facing real awkward times ahead. So let me ask you, thinking into that future, and with the benefit of the age and wisdom that you have right now. But if you were given that chance, away back, I mean, you kind of outlined some of these things before, but what would be the system? What would be the characteristics of a system that would be fit for purpose for the future?

Bali Haque

Well the tomorrow schools review we did and you know we had the first report which was of the hubs and and the second report which was which people don't actually necessarily all know about because there was a second report which sort of pulled back from the hubs but tried to achieve the same thing but both both those reports talked about that the need for more more school-based support for teachers more professional development for teachers and the moving away from that competitive model that we have in place to enable teachers to talk to each other and to collaborate but fundamentally I think if I were going to pick one or two things out of that in terms of what would what would work I would say school leadership is key and we we we don't do that very well in the end schools as organizations have different cultures have different ways of operating and the leadership of schools is critical in that and I don't think we do enough in terms of school leadership so I think that's if I were going to pick one thing I would be saying we need to we need to do better on who leads schools and I mean in terms of a school-based in a school but also regionally so that the people who are working on a regional basis who know the schools who understands what's happening in every school those people also have good leadership skills so to me if I'm going to pick one thing that would be that would be absolutely key

Derek Wenmoth

And I mean that speaks to that notion of systemness in my view when you start talking about you're thinking beyond just the school aren't you you're thinking about the concept of leadership and what it would do in the system yeah

Bali Haque

Yeah, you in the end, you know, an individual school principal working in his or her island can achieve something, but he or she is working in a system. And I think that I mean, one of the things that I think that we need to think about a bit more is the schools that aren't in easy situations who are facing socio economic issues, who are, you know, who have got people coming in the door that need more help. And I don't think we've, we've sort of done enough for them. And, you know, that whole concept of, you know, of schools becoming integrated into the community with a whole lot of support services around them, I think is lots of schools alone, that's happening around the place. But I think we could do more in that space as well. We we tend to, you know, educators tend to, I don't mean educators, people tend to overestimate the impact schools can have, just in terms of what's happening in the school. So it's an extended process that I think we're not really good at. Yeah, I think

Derek Wenmoth

I think what you're saying to me reinforces that we seem to have a very sanitized view of art school as this entity that is now shaping a lot of the policy and a lot of the implementation that comes back to your one size fits all. But when I then think about my own experience in New Zealand was teaching when I was a teacher, mostly in rural areas, mostly in socially disadvantaged areas, certainly in areas where most of my teaching was multi-class because of the size. And so that's the filter that immediately comes to me when I'm listening to a lot of this strategic or the innovation or new things that are being promoted. Now I'm thinking, but how would that fit? How would it land in those areas? And I just can't see it happening.

Bali Haque

Yeah, trust in the system is, we can't see stuff happening because unless we can move to a system where schools, teachers, leaders trust the system, the ministry, the NZQA, we're going to keep going into this sort of space and I suppose the, I mean just moving aside a bit, but back to the NCAA stuff that one of the, that polarizing thing that really hit me was, you know, what were called high decile schools and what were called low decile schools. There is that, because of that autonomy schools have, you get this battle going on in the policy space. One of the things that I noticed in the Tomorrow Schools Review was that generally speaking averages, the higher decile schools have much more clout and influence than the lower decile schools and influence the politicians massively. And I think that, it comes back to your concept of system that the high decile schools are looking after themselves and they tend to have the influence and the result is we get polarization occurring and I mean, just an example, you know, one of the things that the ministry said about NCEA is that grade inflation is a problem, you know, that people are giving higher grades than they should, without any evidence I might add, but when you look at the analysis, which schools are, which schools are doing the most in terms of grade inflation, but those, and this is a fact, it will be those schools which are the higher decile schools. So the higher decile schools are the ones that are responsible for this so-called grade inflation, which there is no evidence of, in terms of the efficacy of it, but those high decile schools are the ones that are giving grades, the number of excellences increasing and those are the very schools that are complaining about grade inflation. So when you start pulling back on that, the schools that are going to the most are going to be the ones that are so-called low decile schools. So you have a system which is actually perpetuating the polarization and that to me is a huge issue, which we can't solve if we still allow principals to look after their school rather think about the system as a whole. I remember vividly in that smaller schools review, we were up in Auckland and the Auckland principals weren't very happy with us and one principal got up and said, this is around the proposals for the hubs, one school principal got up and

said, okay, what will I have to give up if this is implemented? And I thought that sort of encapsulated the whole problem.

Derek Wenmoth

Yeah so look this is a fascinating conversation Bali and we're nearing end of time but I want to put you on the spot with a perhaps a question because one of the things I've noticed is our current government our current minister have been quite rampant leading up to Christmas with messages about the success they're having and a lot of those are targeted at parents they're targeting to persuade parents that they're doing a good job and that this is doing and it's having quite a significant impact I would have to observe um so putting on the spot what would be your message to parents that are out there wondering right now about the future of our education system and what it holds and and what they should be concerned about for their students their kids at school.

Bali Haque

I think the message I would want to give is, and I think lots of parents are onto this actually, is that it is much more complicated than it sounds and beware of data which is problematic at best. So look for more evidence in terms of what's going to happen and what the chief. And I think the other comment I would make is the danger of, and I think there is a danger of this, of the bubble that the minister is willing the argument with the parents. I'm not saying that's not the case in some cases. Clearly she has hit a spot which has been a problem in the view of some people for some time. But actually my thinking, my experiences, many, many parents send their kids to school and they are happy with what the school is doing. They feel the school is doing a good job, the kids are looked after. It's not all bad. It's not like a catastrophe. We've got, you know, there's work to do. You know, there's polarization, there's all, there are pretty issues around how we deal with the education gap. But fundamentally, you know, let's, there is, given that there is plenty of space for improvement, it seems to me that our schools still are doing generally a good job and many parents think that.

Derek Wenmoth

So. Well, that's a positive place to end and it reinforces, doesn't it? One of the the really positive things about the tomorrow's schools kind of philosophy was to encourage much more far no parent community engagement in and with schools. And, you know, by and large, we've seen a huge increase in that over that period of time. And we just want to encourage it, right? Encourage it to continue. But it's been great just to have this

conversation. There'll be plenty more. I'm sure we can talk about it on another occasion. Perhaps we'll do that. But in the meantime, thanks for the talk. See you later. Bye.