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My Letter to Parents

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I imagine a future for our children where New Zealand plays a leading part in the global digital sector. But right now this goal is a significant stretch beyond our current capability and output.

To define where we could be I want to start by talking to you about Estonia. An Eastern European country of just 1.3 million people, and the birth place of Skype and more startups than any other European country.

This small country simply outperforms its size. According to Silicon Valley venture capital guru Marc Andreessen, "Few factors get us as excited as Estonian founders," recently after his company led a \$58 million funding round for TransferWise, the international money transfer company started by two Estonians.

Estonia also happens to be home to one of the most technically advanced school systems in the world.

Or consider their close neighbour Finland. They are similar size to New Zealand with 5.4 million people. Over 40 years ago, they instituted major education reforms. Today, their education system is characterised by a world-class design approach to problem-solving, and integrating hi-tech skills including computational thinking, computer aided design and electronics. According to Bloomberg, this year they are the 4th most innovative country in the world. They're also number 1 in the world based upon the number of researchers per capita.

New Zealand is number 18 on the innovation list. We fall below countries such as Australia and Russia.

So how did we get here? Or, more to the point, how come we're not there, enjoying the same results from progressive education as Estonia and Finland?

From where I stand education plays the most significant role. We are simply miles behind what we know to be the best examples of contemporary education. It is easy to blame the continued stronghold of traditional teaching on 'the system', or on politics or the lack of education investment.

But I don't believe this is the core problem. I have a different theory.

My theory is informed by 40,000 students who my team and I will teach this year. I have also had in-depth insight directly from inside NZ classrooms, shared with me from 1000 teachers studying a postgraduate programme in digital and collaborative learning here at The Mind Lab by Unitec.

We work with hundreds of schools, across the country from coastal schools, Kura schools, regional schools, privileged schools and run of your mill city schools. Each with a similar story about education.

My theory is this: we, as mums, dads, grandparents, and well-meaning relatives are the core reason our children are learning like it is still 1979.

The problem is we as parents haven't collectively mobilised together to demand education progress for our children.

This theory might sound crazy. After all, we don't decide what goes in the curriculum. Which subjects are taught, how students are assessed or even how new knowledge is delivered?

Put yourself in the shoes of your local principal - their every decision, is analysed by their parent community. Whether it be new uniform design, the introduction of devices or a different curriculum focus, causes parents and the community robustly debate their points of views.

How many of us are guilty of challenging school decisions on matters that have little long-term consequence? But how many of us can equally say we have sat down and have really taken time to ask why education still looks like it did decades ago?

After all, we all have an opinion on education, as it one of the few things we all get to experience. But these views of education are often framed deep within the school experience of yesterday, and not with what a student of today needs for to succeed in the world of tomorrow.

So while we sit back confident that our schools are actively responding to change, the reality is our schools have increasingly become legacy systems defined by tradition and by skills that are in desperate need of updating.

This leads to the question...

What is the purpose of education? Once our children have nailed the foundations of reading, writing and arithmetic, what skills are really important for them to know? What is the relevance of learning and retaining facts?

Compare education to industry where to remain relevant and credible, they must respond to customer need and demand. This responsiveness is a measure of progress and evidence of innovation. However in the absence of real demand or expectation by parents for education advancement, no motivation exists to progress schools forward.

I meet a lot of educators. As a rule Senior Educators, Principals, Vice-Chancellors are risk adverse, it goes with their role. They are typically conservative and traditional and unlikely people to lead transformational change – that is unless of course their communities demand it.

While all parents want their kids to have the best possible education they can to prepare them for their future I've had hundreds of conversations with parents that go like this...

I don't see the need for technology in the classroom; it is just an unnecessary distraction.

I learnt using pens and paper, and it worked just fine for me, so why all the fuss about getting devices in the classroom?

My children love technology, but I am worried about their messy handwriting.

Why doesn't my child get more homework, surely the school should be sending homework sheets to learn more facts?

Think how often you use technology in your day – smart phones, tablets, Skype, online banking, search, bookings, communication.

Why would we choose to limit our most digital generation to traditional ways? Why in New Zealand does ICT sit in the curriculum as a 'soft, optional subject? Rather than using technology integrated across the curriculum?

The benefits of contemporary education can be easily defined. It provides more relevance, promotes better student engagement, problem-solving, collaboration and resilience.

This month an OECD report came out on technology in education. It stated that “students who are unable to navigate through a complex digital landscape will no longer be able to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life around them”.

But that part of the report wasn't mentioned in the media. Instead, they focused on a statement that said 'classroom technology can be a distraction and result in pupils cutting and pasting "prefabricated" homework answers from the internet.'

The media also reported that 'the countries and cities with the lowest use of the internet in school - South Korea, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Japan - are among the top performers in

international tests.

Do we as parents believe that by having our children rote learn and pass exams they will live happily ever after? That may have been the case if they were graduating in 1989, but it is simply not the case for those students who will graduate in the second decade of the 21st Century.

Today the most up to date information, access to the best minds, research and knowledge can be found online, in real time, all of the time. We now need to learn to how to validate and recognise good data, find relevant information and valuable facts.

We now need rapid, bold change.

Rapid change should be defined. This is not the sort of gradual change that saw you comfortably trade your cassette tapes to CD's or your CD's to MP3's or MP3's to Spotify. We don't have a decade to meander slowly using incremental change in education - as we have already spent decades debating and wasting time.

If we change things 10% or even 20%, the subtleties of change will have a negligible impact. Progress will only be achieved if we make a bold, transformational change that offers impactful change.

We cannot sit back and do nothing just because it all looks too hard. The longer we stay quiet on our expectations for education relevance, the greater skill divides we will create for our children.

My own children are part of this transitional generation. They are digital kids learning in an analogue education system. As they exit secondary school, they have learnt the same subjects, taught in the same way that I did 30 years ago. There isn't another industry who can claim such slow progress.

If you look outside the classroom, you will discover our world where we can be transported by autonomous vehicles, communicate with robots built upon artificial intelligence and print 3D prototypes on 3D printers. Our children can learn in virtual worlds driven by Oculus Rift, they can learn to program online and collaborate with classes across the globe in real time. We can connect to the internet by drones transmitting wifi at 28,000 feet above the earth or by Google balloons.

No one is debating the ongoing need for literacy and numeracy, but we need to stop debating progress as though technology is mutually exclusive of every other form of learning.

If a company is failing to make a profit, no one blames it was the use of laptops for the companies failure.

No one ever says 'if we had only stayed doing things we did 20 years ago things would be better'.

However validating the old way of doing things is so often the logic used by parents and the

media use to argue against education progress. Parents and the media need to look past the 'entertainment' side of technology – past the YouTube and social media phenomena and focus on the real enhancement technology can bring to the classroom.

Where teachers are empowered to apply contemporary teaching practices in the classroom, results in heightened levels of student engagement and understanding. As students move away from the use of laptops for word processing, they finally get to showcase their real potential and demonstrate how computers and technology are knowledge enablers in their world.

Just through accessing online platforms, classes have access to experts across the world through Skype, or the ability to create of 3D virtual models to understand spatial design, they can produce stories as animations or code a maths game develop rich problem-solving skills. These are all essential skills for their road ahead.

As parents, we too often use exam results as the measure of student success. We often chose schools based upon those with the highest grade passes, which completely overlooks that the most successful young people today are often self-educated –they have simply learned how to do things outside of the school system.

Today's best educators are incredibly critical about how and why they introduce and integrate technology into the classroom. They fully understand that there is no value in simply teaching content. Context is everything.

I believe we could be a country of creators who are part of global economy, producing world-class innovations and solutions for the new world. We could embrace technological advances, tackling life-changing issues such as developing new forms of energy, raising health standards and developing innovations for the aging New Zealand population. We could develop scientific solutions, medical breakthroughs, game-changing software and companies who export digital products globally.

So, this is my letter to parents.

It is time to be brave and support our children for the road ahead. Put aside time to truly understand what employers are looking for in future graduates. Speak with your school principal and get to understand their vision for education transformation. Don't judge schools by their decile rating or their exam results. Look at your children as individuals and choose the school that best suits their talents, aspirations and potential.

Support schools and teachers who are leading the charge and preparing our students for tomorrow.

Let's work together to put the topic of the transformation of education into everyday conversation, as the more we ask, the more information we will have to inform our decisions.


Mostly I want you to ask yourself, Are you preparing your child for their life or for the one you have already lived?

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Self Employed 3y ...

Agree.

With this comes the valuable teaching of:
-Soft skills
-Collaboration ...see more

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Fantastic article **Frances Valintine**. I'm going to pass this along to two of the MPs spearheading the Future of Work Commission for NZ. Your article beautifully summarizes the type of discussion we were having last week at a policy workshop...and I think you'd be a great voice within this group.

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