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Multiple Pathways

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There was a time, thirty years ago, when a feature of the New Zealand education system at the post-primary level was a wide range of choice, options and pathways for students. This array was based largely on curriculum that reflected the differing needs of students and a clear emphasis on learning knowledge and skills related to future employment. The system, along with the other European English-speaking education systems, set out to provide pathways that led to worthwhile qualifications for a large proportion of the student population that came out of realistic goals that matched clear ambitions. The education system seemed to foster success through the provision of secondary education that had multiple exit points that led to coherent pathways to further education and training and / or employment.

These education systems had greatest success with students who were:
- white;
- English speaking,
- middle class,
- academically well-prepared at each level within the K-12 system for the challenges of the next level
- from homes with some experience of at least secondary education and probably further and higher education
- members of migrant groups that could measure up to these characteristics.

But the education system has always been challenged by students who were:
- coming from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- were from homes where English was an additional language;
- had relatively recently arrived as members of a migrant group;
- are first-in-family or first generation students (i.e. were from families with no prior experience of further or highed education and training;
- were inadequately prepared from an academic perspective preparation for the challenges of the next stage level of K-12 education;
- second-chance students;
- older age groups;
- part-time students.

This had not always been the situation. There were many opportunities for people who were not enjoying success in the mainstream of secondary education to proceed along other pathways to qualifications and employment. These included moving directly into employment where often on the job training was available. At all ages, people could attend night classes that were predominantly focused on vocational and technical education. In addition, apprenticeships were available in large numbers across a wide selection of industrial and employment sectors and the economy offered significant opportunity for those without formal

qualifications to get their start and in many cases to find satisfactory (and even satisfying) work in low-skilled or unskilled activity.

But this all changed in the last quarter of the 20th century as these opportunities were for a variety of reasons stripped out of the community. Employment became more difficult to access as employers sought those with skills as they retreated from on-the-job training, the polytechnic sector was developed and consequently shifted training into daylight and night classes in secondary school became increasingly recreational and social. As the government withdrew from the economy they took with them a significant proportion of apprenticeships and numbers fell away rapidly. A wide range of pressures including the impact of technology and the attractiveness of overseas, low-wage economies saw a marked decline in unskilled and low skilled employment opportunities and at the same time migrant groups were welcomed into many of the unskilled and low skilled jobs that survived.

In this new environment, educational failure, lack of success at school had become very explicit. The options and pathways that once had been the blotting paper for educational failure were now no longer there.

In response to this situation, the European English-speaking education systems drifted towards characteristics that reflected much more the characteristics of the American model. A focus on general abilities overtook the previous emphasis on vocationally specific skills as secondary school programmes increasingly drifted to a one-size-fits-all approach which replaced the course options and tracking of earlier times. The employment orientation of secondary schools was slowly obscured as the connections between the curriculum and future employment became more opaque. Whereas once most secondary students exited the secondary school at a point where they could continue along a pathway towards a wide range of successful outcomes, the system developed an increasingly long tail of dropouts.

The key changes happened in New Zealand during the period 1980 – 2000 when students stayed in the secondary school (at least in theory) for longer and longer periods of time.
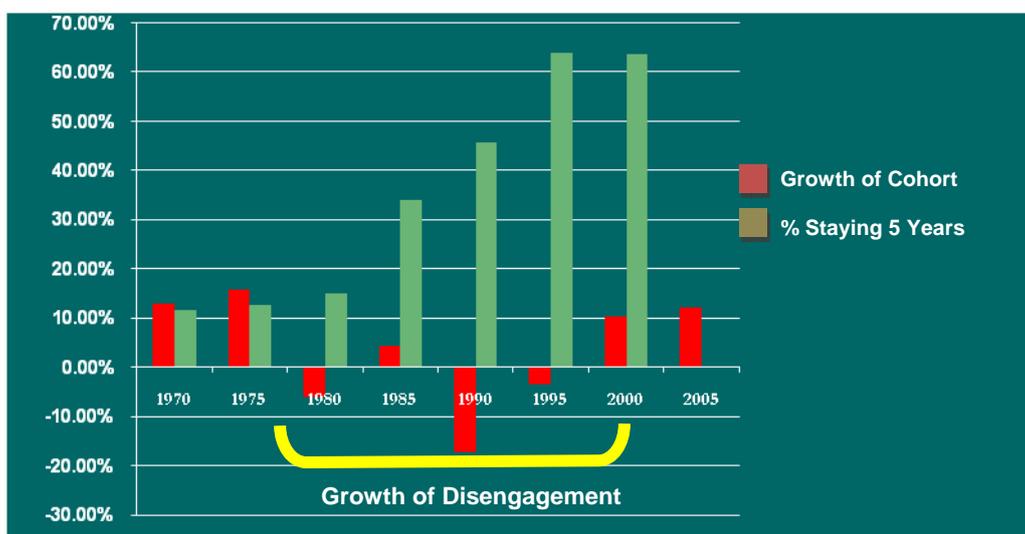

Fig. 1   The extension of time spent in secondary school 1970 -2005   (Middleton)

Figure 1 shows that during the period 1970 to 2005 the percentage of the secondary school cohort staying at secondary school for 5 years increased from around 20% to 62% in a manner that was unrelated to the growth of the cohort entering the secondary schools. It was during this period of time that disengagement from education as a phenomenon appeared

not only in New Zealand (Middleton, 2008) but also in Canada (Tilleczek, 2008), Australia (Coates & Krause, 2005) and Great Britain (Watson, 2005) and escalated in the United States of America (Krist & Venezia, 2003).

Three types of disengagement provide a useful frame work in which to understand the ways in which young people move away from education. *Physical disengagement* sees young people actually leave the education system completely severing their ties with any form of education and training; secondly, *virtual disengagement* captures the phenomenon of students who physically stay within an education or training setting but for whom there is no tangible benefit in terms of qualification or perhaps even learning; finally there is *virtual disengagement*, a student in positively engaged in learning and might even be seeming to achieve some success but when this is tested at the next level (post-secondary) it is found wanting either because it does not represent a relevant and appropriate set of skills and knowledge or because it is inappropriate to the chosen pathway resulting in failure.

The extent of disengagement is measured (Minstry of Education, 2007) in patterns (which are in relative terms, common to the five major English-speaking education systems) such as:

- leaving the education system prior to the legal school leaving age (20%);
- truancy (30,000 truants each day from New Zealand secondary schools);
- exclusions (up to 4,000 each year in New Zealand);
- students who leave primary school but fail to appear in secondary schools (in New Zealand this might be as high as 4,500 students each year).

In addition to this is a set of secondary indicators such as those who appear in youth judicial systems (80% have no meaningful contact with education and training) and the NEETS (Not in Employment, Education and Training), 15-19 year olds who are disengaged and not involved in training of any form.

Analysis of disengagement will only at best provide a picture of the situation in ever increasing detail. It is not adequate to simply declare that the experiment of universal general academic secondary schooling has failed and not seek a way forward. Bill Gates (Gates, 2005) issues a call to action:

> *"America's high schools are obsolete… This isn't an accident or a flaw in the system; it is the system.*
>
> *The heart of the economic argument for better high schools… essentially says "We'd better do something about these kids not getting an education… because it's hurting us." But there's also a moral argument for better high schools, and it says: "We'd better do something about kids not getting an education, because it's hurting them."*
>
> Gates (2005)

A recent book entitled *The Death of the Comprehensive High School?* (Franklin & McCulloch, 2007) poses the question that the questioning of the extent to which existing models of secondary schooling can be expected to cater for the range of students that now enter its gates to receive an education that prepares them for the world to follow. The collection of essays typifies the issues as international and urgent. These issues are variously described but can generally be grouped under the following headings (California Department of Education, 2008):

- high school graduation / leaving requirements;
- rigorous and relevant coursework;

- poor preparation for higher education;
- poor preparation for careers;
- persistent gaps in achievement.

A further analysis (Oakes and Saunders , 2008, p.3) strike a grim note.

> *Evidence abounds that high schools simply don't work very well: Witness strikingly high drop-out rates, large percentages of graduates unprepared to succeed in college or career, education gaps that jeopardize African American and Latina students' life chances, and widespread student disengagement.*

They go on to describe secondary education in the United States as being in a state of *"pervasive dysfunction."* But rather than pursue the old binary argument between an "academic" or a "vocational" secondary education they report on what some call "the third way" – multiple pathways an approach whose "advocates seeks to move beyond what they see as a tired debate between academic and vocational education and the traditional tracking of students into different high school courses" (Oakes and Saunders, 2008, p5)

Much of this approach has its origins in a strand of thinking that has been much discussed but much less acted upon over the past several decades. In the United States, Monson (1997) proposed a reform strategy that closely resembles the current multiple pathways approach and again in 2003 the term became centre stage in a number of major reports (ref, ref, ref.) The major refocus on Career and Technical Education (CTE) was also premised on the multiple pathways approach.

There is some agreement as to the characteristics of quality pathways and provision. The following table shows the connections between various analyses.

Component	California Dept of Education (2008) p14	Oakes and Saunders (2008)	THS (Middleton, 2008)	ECHS (Hoffman, 2004)	The 3rd Way (Atkinson & al., 2010)
Curriculum	An integrated core curriculum	A college preparatory core	Integrated curriculum based on the NZ Curriculum	Integrated standards-based academic content and technical content	CTE as a part of all students' high school ecperience
Career and Technical Education	An integrated career technical core curriculum	A professional or technical core grounded in real-world standards	Base of preparing for trades and careers leading to CTE programmes	Broad-based CTE offerings introducing students to wide career options	Produce life-long learners academically skilled and career- ready
Activity outside the school	A series of work-based-learning opportunities	Field based learning, realistic workplace simulations	Retain links with previous school, personal development opportunities	Work-based learning and experiences	
Support	Student support services	Additional student support	Significant additional student support		
Professional development	PD to give career and technical educators the tool to integrate curriculum		High school teachers working with CTE teachers		
High School / tertiary Links			Complete integration of high school and tertiary programmes		Business leaders linked with educators
Other features		Promote students entrepreneurialism to aid career interests		Link secondary with post-secondary	Work within existing structures

The common features that come through many analyses are that a "multiple pathways" approach is likely to be:

- programmes that are both academic and vocational/technical;
- a close integration of high school and post-secondary level study;

- an opportunity to experience practical / applied education as well as the more conventionally academic programmes;
- teachers from different sectors working alongside each other.

This is not dissimilar to the core components and essential characteristics of high quality programmes which is summarized by a major Californian report (O'Connell & et.al., 2010):

Core components
- an integrated core curriculum that is challenging academically, is delivered through problem- and project-based learining and in "intentionally" real world in its context;
- an integrated career technical core curriculum which contains standards-based courses, develops career management skills and emphasizes academic principles and standards;
- a series of work-based-learning opportunities;
- comprehensive student support services.

Essential Characteristics
- equity and access;
- informed student choice;
- student engagement;
- relevance for students;
- personalisation and support ;
- depth of learning
- breadth and transferability of learning;
- developmental appropriateness;
- high quality curricula and teaching
- linkages to middle grades and to opportunities beyond high school;
- industry and community partnerships;
- adults as learners.

Over the past thirty years there has developed a conventional pathway through secondary schools and as outlined above this has led to the development of significant disengagement from education. This has happened at a time when the curriculum had become increasing homogenous in the face of increasing diversity amongst the student population. This situation will be addressed most effectively through the development of multiple pathways. This might be shown diagrammatically in the following diagram.
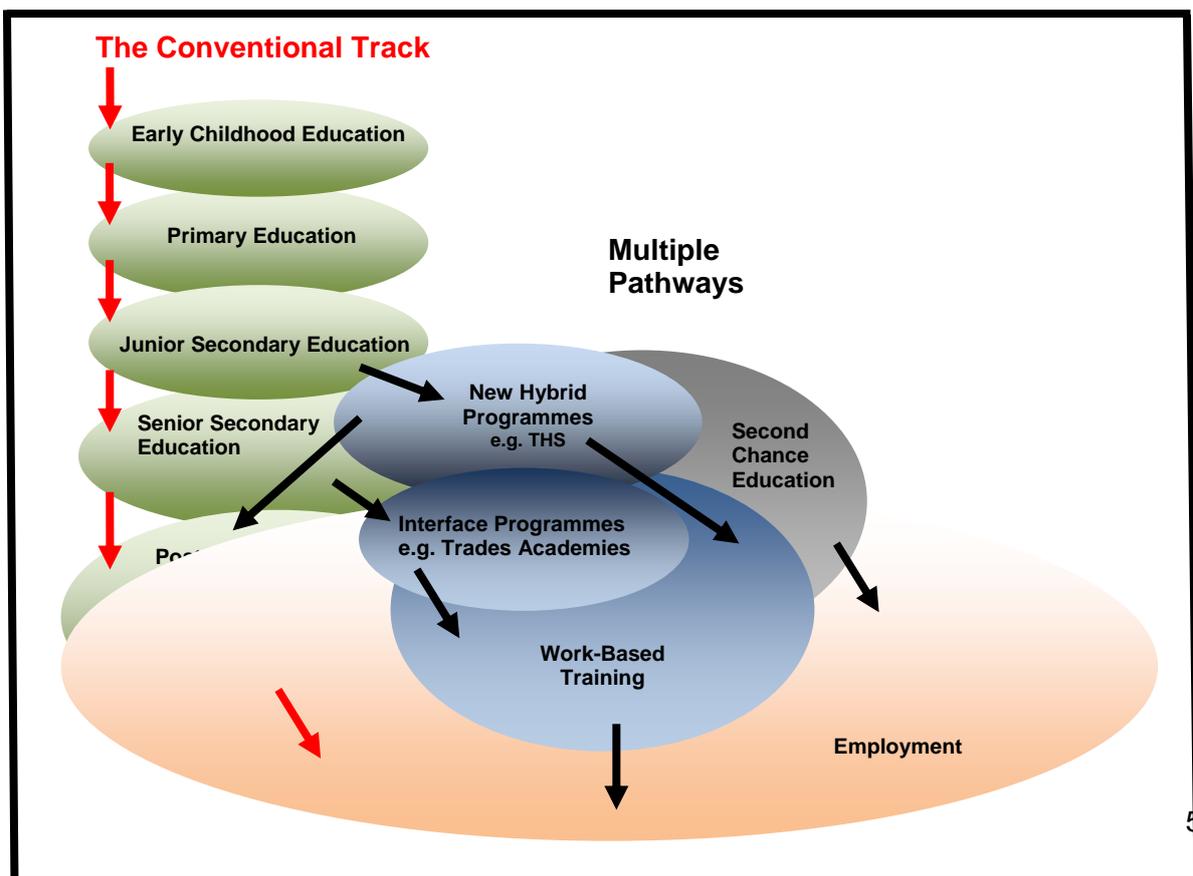
There is nothing in the multiple pathways model that says that the conventional track is not a good one. It is and it meets the needs and plans of a majority of students. But it does not meet the needs of <u>all</u> students. The minority of students who are currently reflected in the statistics of disengagement and educational failure have needs that are not being met by that track and it will take a systemic and structural change to provide the pathways that open up educational success to all students, pathways that allow students to move to a secure future that has in it employment and the skills to sustain a family and contribute to and participate in the community.

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