



United Nations Association of New Zealand

**One Size Does Not Fit All: How a Montessori Secondary School may be the Solution
to Improve Quality Education in New Zealand**

Internship report

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August 2020

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the support and guidance of the United Nations Association of New Zealand (UNANZ), in particular the Northern branch. Thanks to help from Natalie Harbott and Steven Arnolds who got me going and allowed me to pursue my interests. I am indebted to Steven who supported me with strong effort and enthusiasm as I was able to use his school, *Peace Experiment*, to base my paper on, which was invaluable to my research. I would also like to make a special mention to Nik Parkin, who gave me his precious time and knowledge, which empowered me to make this paper successful. To the students at *Peace Experiment* who I observed and spoke to, I wish you all the best and envy your courage to break the norms that surround state schools. I am forever grateful to everyone involved.

New Zealand's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of Quality Education is to “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*” but how well do many New Zealanders really do this? Right now, one big issue with education in New Zealand is that it is expected that one style of learning will suit everyone, leaving many children behind. In ‘New Zealand's Progress Towards SDGs - 2019’ report the New Zealand government stated that “although many of our young people achieve at high levels in some areas, evidence shows that our education system is not delivering for all (NZ government).” Therefore, my report focuses on *Peace Experiment*, a Montessori school in Panmure, Auckland, that offers quality education for all. *Peace Experiment* demonstrates an inclusive learning environment as one of their core values is *Manaakitanga*, which they believe is to “recognise and show gratitude for the diversity of people from different ages, genders, cultures, nationalities, abilities, perspectives, and orientations; and acknowledge their contributions to our multicultural society (Peace Experiment).” The students manage their own learning as there are no classes, no exams, no judgement, no bullying, and no discrimination, allowing the students to be truly themselves and enabling them to understand the bigger world around them at a much younger age.

Over the course of researching *Peace Experiment*, I had the opportunity to sit down and talk to Nik Parkin, a teacher/guide at the school. After working at universities around the world, Parkin felt like there was something missing when it came to teaching. He later moved to teach at Onehunga high school, which has a decile 3 (this is a rating out of ten and the lower the rating, then the more students who live in poorer communities), to make a greater impact on his community, but still felt like he was not adding enough value to society. Parkin then found his

calling at *Peace Experiment*. He said that he is, “faced with many more challenges as a teacher here, although it might not be stressful.” I believe that New Zealand has a quality education system, however there are areas that need improving such as offering inclusive quality education to everyone, no matter their background, ethnicity, orientation, or ability, which is something that *Peace Experiment* actively embraces. Parkin mentioned that many of the students are at this school because “the system failed them.” Consequently, it is time that we utilise and recognise institutions like *Peace Experiment* that offer an inclusive learning environment for all, especially those whose needs are not being met at state schools.

Peace Experiment was established in 2017 by the director, Steven Arnold. When I asked Arnolds why he felt the need to start this school he said, “ the world needs caring, considerate and compassionate citizens. Montessori education provides that. Secondary education needs to provide a safe and respectful place for individuals to find themselves. Peace is a global and pressing issue. What can the students do to change the world? Lets try things out.” Another value that *Peace Experiment* implements is Whakapapa, with the aim to “contribute to the Montessori education movement through furthering the work and legacy of Maria Montessori (Peace Experiment).” Maria Montessori was an Italian physician who founded Montessori education in Rome during the early 1900s (American Montessori Society). Montessori is a style of learning that has been around for over a century that, “provides a conscious effort to create a more peaceful world,” enabling the students to learn however it best suits them. “No class. No homework. No uniform. No assemblies. No assignments. No detentions. No tests. No exams (Peace Experiment).” *Peace Experiment* offers education for students aged 11-18 years old and

operates from 8am until 5pm. It is up to the student when they arrive and leave, although they are required to be there for at least four hours. The students should know how busy they are and how much work they need to do because they are in control of what they are learning. Every two weeks there is a conference with Parkin and Arnolds who meet with the students individually to discuss their curriculums. The student will choose four separate studies and a choice of one SDG goal, with the studies usually being rollover projects, unless they are finished. After every meeting the challenges and successes that each student has faced is recorded in the database and emailed to the students, and their parents.

Furthermore, *Peace Experiment* is a good example of quality education because the teachers/guides encourage their students to focus on the SDG goals. The 'New Zealand's Progress Towards SDGs - 2019' report acknowledged that the government wants quality education to include "teaching sustainable development and global citizenship [that] is important for New Zealand's future." Which *Peace Experiment* is already doing as students also have the opportunity to choose their own focus point within the SDG's. Arnolds said that, "often this is learning more about an aspect of the goals, following their own interests and abilities. Sometimes their interests merge with other SDGs as they unfold." Consequently, this ensures that students learn about the greater world and issues that are unfolding around them, which is necessary for their future.

Not only do Arnold and Parkin meet with students to discuss their curriculums, but they are also around if a student needs guidance or a subtle nudge to encourage them to do something

productive. Parkin says, “we want every kid making their own decision, trying to reduce the power imbalance, but the challenge comes when they choose to do nothing.” This curriculum offers an inclusive environment, as Parkin and Arnolds are aware that each student has different needs, which they are able to meet without compromising other students' learning opportunities. Many schools are trying to identify between different students' needs and learning styles, with varying degrees of success, but *Peace Experiment* is a great example of a school that does an exceptional job of this. These students have the potential to flourish at *Peace Experiment* because they are not expected to sit through structured classes that do not suit their learning, where they are likely to fail, crushing their confidence. For example, one student that I met had just moved to *Peace Experiment*. He disclosed to me that he knew he was smart and had the ability to excel in school, but wasn't suited to state school where he was failing. When I later spoke with him he appeared to be much happier as he was now in a learning environment that supported him.

My observations at *Peace Experiment* also concluded that students were more productive than I had expected. Arnold has estimated that students in state schools on average only have 15 minutes to do efficient work after they have gotten to class, settled down, been given instruction, reviewed old work, and faced interruptions. This highlights another disadvantage of state schools because Montessori education, “Provides students with significant portions of unstructured time for self-directed work (average equals approximately two hours per day) and does not utilize the typical block period organization (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi).” This allows students at *Peace Experiment* to be more efficient and productive with their time. Students also have the

flexibility to leave if they need to grab lunch, go to the library, or go into town if they have planned an activity. As opposed to being locked in a state school not allowed to leave until the final bell is rung.

Another benefit of this curriculum is that there are no set periods or certain amount of time a student has to spend on their work. Kevin Rathunde is a professor at the University of Utah and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a professor at Claremont Graduate University, who discuss supporting a student's interests and challenging those interests is crucial for the success of the children. However, they also argue that “if a school context were only supportive, children would be susceptible to fooling, or jumping haphazardly from one interest to the next without focus and concentration,” and “if a context were only challenging-- the more typical condition in most middle schools and high schools-- children would be susceptible to drugerdy, or being told what to concentrate on without an emotional investment in what they were doing (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi).” Therefore, *Peace Experiment* exhibits quality education because students are encouraged to pursue their interests while challenging themselves. The article also said that another benefit of Montessori education is that students can work for as long as they like without being interrupted as, “after observing a 3-year-old child who was so engaged with wooden cylinders that she could not be distracted,” which is another disadvantage of a state school (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi).

However, an education opportunity like this does have a cost, with tuition fees costing NZ\$8,653 annually. The greatest cost that *Peace Experiment* faces is paying their staff, which is

a small price to pay when they are there at the students disposal and are not just limited to class time where students have to compete for attention. For that reason, we can better understand the supportive and inclusive learning environment that *Peace Experiment* offers so that each student can flourish and grow independently.

One question that I wanted to clarify with the teachers/guides at *Peace Experiment* was about the National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA), and when will these students get their university entrance. After speaking with Parkin, he pointed out that NCEA is not everything, and probably one reason why the *Peace Experiment* is so inclusive. At this school, they value self worth, mental health, and a student's happiness. As opposed to prioritising their grades and if they are on track to university. Hence, we can understand how important it is that a child is in a safe, inclusive, and no pressure learning environment where they can be themselves, which *Peace Experiment* provides. Furthermore, if the students themselves decide to do NCEA then they can make that happen, but if they do not, then that is also acceptable. Most parents now understand that there are several paths to success and buy into the philosophy of *Peace Experiment*. However, for other parents it does take time. There is occasionally pressure from the students' parents to do NCEA, but the decision is completely up to the student. Some of the students who are participating in NCEA were also extremely relaxed about the whole process; they knew what they were required to do and were on track at their own rate, without being told what they had to do and when they had to do it. Hence, we can comprehend how success does not always look the same for everybody as providing children with a safe and inclusive environment is also important.

Once an individual graduates high school, or maybe university, they are considered to be a part of the 'big world' and are expected to make their own decisions. However, the students at *Peace Experiment* are expected to make their own decisions during their maturing years, giving them the upper hand when they evolve into society. After observing the students at *Peace Experiment* I could understand many of these important decisions that they have to make on a daily basis. For example, many children firstly choose to attend that school, they also have the choice of what time to come to school and when to leave, what they want to study, and how to best manage their time. All decisions that I rarely had a say in when I was at a state school. This shows that at *Peace Experiment* they are encouraging their students to develop important life skills, such as decision making, into their daily lives that is indispensable for their future wellbeing.

Not only does *Peace Experiment* allow children to make important decisions, but the students are also exposed to socialisation with peers who are different to them, for many reasons. The University of Chicago Press released an article about Montessori education that stated, "because a significant amount of daily time was unstructured, students had ample time for peer interaction and were encouraged to collaborate with others," which I had the opportunity to witness first hand (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi). While I sat observing at the school, I watched a child with Down syndrome interact with one student who did not have a learning disability. This kind of relationship is something that you would rarely, or never, see at a state school. New Zealand also has the worst bullying rate in the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) as “just under 60% of students experiencing bullying either weekly or monthly - more than twice the rate of the countries with the lowest rates (UNICEF).” Therefore, bullying is also something that *Peace Experiment* is conscious of and aims to eliminate. MHF researched that, “mental illness experience discrimination – name-calling, bullying, belittling attitudes, and/or exclusion – from family, whānau and peers (Mental Health Foundation).” This research highlights how important *Peace Experiments* philosophy is because they do not tolerate bullying and encourage inclusive relationships no matter what the students background is. In addition, the ‘New Zealand's Progress Towards SDGs - 2019’ states that they want the public education system to allow students to “engage fully in society and lead rewarding and fulfilling lives.” This is something that *Peace Experiment* encourages every day, providing their students with invaluable relationships and opportunities and critical decision making that you would not otherwise have at a state school. For that reason, *Peace Experiment* heavily encourages their students to make important decisions at a young age, and they do not tolerate bullying. Instead, the school strongly believes in inclusive relationships and why their institution offers so much more than just quality education in New Zealand.

Another advantage that *Peace Experiment* has to ensure that they can provide equal education opportunities is they have their very own mentor, Marie Kaukura, who offers pastoral care to the 29 students. One might argue that Kaukura’s role at *Peace Experiment* is the most important because her “position as a mentor is to be there for the students and support them as they navigate their world. She is also a guide and student advocate (*Peace Experiment*).” Having someone like Marie at a school is more important than ever in schools as the New Zealand

government has just announced a NZ\$75.8 million plan to give primary school and secondary schools counselors, with the hope “to implement its recommended ratio of one counsellor to 400 secondary students (Nicol-Williams).” *Peace Experiments* philosophy is to value mental health and self worth, something that state schools need to address more actively. Research discovered that mental illness among our youth is becoming a greater issue as “more than 150 young New Zealanders take their lives each year, one of the highest rates among Western countries,” and “90 percent of young people dying by suicide or making suicide attempts will have had a mental health disorder at the time (Police Mangers’ Guild Trust).” As I sat talking to Parkin, several students came in asking, “have you seen Marie?” Or “do you know where Marie is?” Parkin responded by saying, “I think twenty percent of my time here is spent trying to find Marie.” Students feel safe with Marie around as she has empathy for students' individual situations, because of her own personal trauma of youth. In addition to being empathetic, Arnolds described Marie as being “fun, personable, and professional with privacy - she can be trusted.” This shows how important Marie’s role is at a secondary school because it offers students the support that they need during this crucial time in their lives, although they may not realise. The Ministry of Education and Association of Counsellors conducted a study and found that, “counselling significantly improved students’ wellbeing regardless of gender and ethnicity (Nicol-Williams).” Furthermore, in low-risk secondary schools some students are expected to wait up to eight weeks before being able to meet with a counsellor (Nicol-Williams). Even though Marie is so much more than just a counsellor, it highlights how significant her role is at *Peace Experiment*, because the kids have her at their disposal and are only competing with 28 other students for her time. Unlike hundreds of other students at a state school. This highlights that not only is *Peace*

Experiment ahead of the game, but they have been for the past two years when Marie began offering her support to the students.

One large problem that the New Zealand education system has is that it is designed for white students, resulting in Māori and Pacific to be at a disadvantage from a young age. The ‘New Zealand's Progress Towards SDGs - 2019’ report stated that, “ Inequity remains a persistent and serious issue, with insufficient progress toward equity of educational outcomes, particularly for Māori and Pacific students and those with disabilities and learning support needs (NZ Government).” This inequality is something that *Peace Experiment* is aware of, and actively trying to make improvements so that their six Māori and Pacific students feel valued. Parkin mentioned that one challenge that Māori and Pacific face is finding an inclusive environment where they can succeed. We see the efforts that *Peace Experiment* has made so that their school is inclusive by displaying their values in Māori (which you can see on their website <https://www.peace.school.nz/>), greeting their students with a daily handshake or embrace, and using holistic learning. Holistic learning allows students to discover themselves so that they can find purpose in their life, which encourages equality and every student to be themselves. They do this by adapting protocols of acknowledgements, where every week the students are all expected to make a recognition of acknowledgement, giving everyone an equal voice to learn about themselves and the greater community around them. In addition, *Peace Experiment* achieves inclusion through Tikanga, which means the ‘Māori way of doing things’ through culture, fashion, formality, and meaning. Not only does *Peace Experiment* include Māori customs into students' daily lives, but they also attempt to understand multiple faiths, religions, and languages

in order to make this school and inclusive learning environment for all. However, Parkin acknowledges that they still need to do more work in this area, like many other schools.

Without even realising it, or intending, a Montessori Secondary School like the *Peace Experiment* helps with the crisis of the teaching shortage in New Zealand. ‘New Zealand's Progress Towards SDGs - 2019’ report stated that, “Our education system is facing increasing pressure on teacher supply in certain locations, subjects and parts of the sector (NZ Government).” Another report by Secondary Teacher Supply Working Group discovered that, “just under half [of secondary school teachers] leave teaching within the first five years of joining the profession (Secondary Teacher Supply Working Group).” Many make the assumption that teachers' income is what is driving them out of the profession. However, Parkin argued that, “no one goes into teaching because of the pay.” Instead, Parkin believed it was the stress pushing teachers away because they do not feel valued and teaching was not worth their time. In addition, Parkin also mentioned that from his own personal experience many teachers get easily frustrated and as a result take this anger out on their students. Meanwhile, Parkin loves coming into school everyday because he has a positive relationship with his students who do not resent him, making himself feel valued. Parkin said, “the thing that really matters is how well we know the students and having a personal relationship with the students.” Another advantage for teachers at *Peace Experiment* is that the teachers have a much larger input and more responsibility into their students' education than they would at a state school. Parkin, who used to work at Onehunga high school, said “I did not get to make any decision at my old school” when discussing the curriculum, but at *Peace Experiment* “I have more freedom to say and do what I want.” As a

result this makes teaching far more exciting and enjoyable for people like Parkin who feels that he is now leaving an impact on students, as opposed to just going through the motions at state school.

Beyonce Knowles and Taylor Swift, musicians; Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon; Larry Page, CEO of Google; Thomas Edison, inventor, are just a few names of the highly successful people who were once students of Montessori education. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Nobel Prize-winning author, once said that, “I do not believe there is a method better than Montessori for making children sensitive to the beauties of the world and awakening their curiosity regarding the secrets of life (Primary Montessori).” So what is the future for *Peace Experiment* and other institutions that provide quality education around New Zealand? Well I asked Parkin and he said, “we want this school to find its own feet and for students, and for kids, to come here because they want to, not because they have a learning disability, or an issue at school.” Hence, it is time we acknowledge Montessori education that provides quality learning environments and encourages everyone to find their individual strengths. Just like many entrepreneurs in cutting edge fields who are making the world a better place because of their foundation in Montessori education.

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