An Interview with Professor James Chapman

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James Chapman, Professor of Educational Psychology and Pro Vice-Chancellor of the College of Education at Massey University shares his career highlights, his proudest achievements and some surprising details about his secondary school days which all provide an insight into a courageous academic who takes his role as "critical conscience" seriously, even if that means his views are not always popular with the establishment.

What was school like for you?

In many ways I've come into education as something of a pretender because my school record, especially my secondary school record, was absolutely appalling and, had a classification existed in New Zealand at that time, I would probably have been classified as learning disabled. Labelled and not helped, as is often the case for kids who have learning disabilities or learning difficulties in New Zealand. I failed University Entrance. I sat the exam, got very low marks and then went back into what was then the Lower Sixth, and got accredited. I was at the young end of my cohort so went back for an additional year in the Upper Sixth and in the first year they introduced the Bursary exam, I failed that. But then I figured I had time on my side, I had intended to get a tertiary education, either teachers' college or university. So despite getting a failed result I decided to go to university – Victoria - and things improved from there on in. The only subject I failed at university was the subject I was best at in secondary school. So I guess as educationalists we often say that past performance or behaviour is often an indicator of achievement and that isn't always the case. The challenge for the system is how to figure out who can make the best of a different type of environment, or of an opportunity. That was what happened for me. The university environment suited me and I was able to pick the subjects that I really enjoyed like history. I ended up double-majoring in it but had come bottom of the class in my Upper Sixth year. English, in which I had done reasonably well at secondary school, I failed in my first year at university and I had to repeat it in the second year. I ended up taking four years for a three year BA degree with a double major in education and history.

What made you keep going after so much failure?

Failure in the sense of not accomplishing goals was not an option. That was not imposed on me, it was pretty much self-driven. No-one in my family or in the families of my cousins, as far as I know, went to university. In my family I am the only one. So I was under no pressure to go to university although my Dad was a professional consulting engineer, he'd done it the hard way after WWII having been in the war. I just had an inherent determination; it was internally imposed rather than externally driven. In my last year at secondary school we organised a carefully staged raid on the careers teacher's office, to find out what the recommendations post secondary school were for us. Not surprisingly, because I was a poor student it was recommended that my chances of succeeding at university were virtually zilch. I just laughed and thought that was hilarious and when I got my bachelors degree I wanted to go back to the school, and just gesticulate in unpleasant signs about what these people could do with their recommendations. So I got hooked onto history and education and tossed up for what to do next. I opted for an honours year in education and then went to secondary teachers' college in Christchurch on the new campus at Ilam and did my training in history, geography and social studies. While I was there I started my masters thesis and did my data collection at one of my section schools; Porirua College. I did a cross-cultural study of identity formation, comparing Māori and Pakeha boys, the sort of research that would

not get done these days. That led me into my passions. I had an intense interest in Māori education and things Māori. I took a Māori language minor in my programme at teachers' college, chose to go to Porirua College, then to Rerekohu District High School in Te Araroa on the East Cape, just to absorb and learn as much as I could.

At that time in my career I don't think I was aware that I was working towards passions in research that would colour my career. They had grown out of my determination to gain qualifications for myself and they have inspired me ever since.

Did you meet any mentors on this qualification and research pathway?

I had an excellent thesis supervisor, John Nichols, at Victoria University who was absolutely one of the leading researchers in the broad field of achievement motivation and he was a very, very key person in my career. I had a meeting with John when I was finishing my master's thesis in my first year of teaching at Horowhenua College in Levin. He asked what I intended doing in the future. I had taken out a studentship and had a two-year bond. I told him that once I'd finished that I'd go overseas like everyone else and teach. He asked if I had thought of doing a PhD and I told him that I didn't really know what a PhD was. I thought I couldn't do one because of the struggle I'd had to get that far. He told me that my thesis wasn't just a great topic, it was the design of my research, the tightness of writing and that no-one had done anything like it, so there was no reason not to do a PhD. In the end he talked me into doing a doctorate in Canada or the USA. I applied to three universities and chose the University of Alberta in Canada. I had a short OE in the UK and Europe and then went to Canada and started my doctorate. It was a programme in the Department of Educational Psychology with 100 PhD students on campus plus about 200 Masters students so the place was absolutely humming. A lot of Alberta oil money was going into the university, with lots of students from all around the world. I had planned to do my doctorate in cross - cultural psychology to link back to work I had started in my masters and my interest in Māori achievement and education. But it became clear that the changes that needed to take place about who researches on or with indigenous peoples were starting to occur in Canada and I respected that and figured that, far be it for me being a New Zealander to come to Canada and do cross-cultural research with First Nations peoples. Fortunately I was nabbed by a doctoral supervisor who had worked with other New Zealand students who had all gone on to make significant contributions in the world. Fred Boersma chose me as another kiwi. He is a mentor that I have maintained contact with ever since. He was disliked by a number of students and faculty members. People said that whatever you did, not to work with Fred but we got on like a house on fire. We shared a dry sense of humour. He had changed his own research direction and had developed an interest in learning disabilities as an emerging field and we got to working on this. I was interested in self-system variables in my master's work and in that context I had looked at Erikson's identity theories and some other self-related aspects. I did my thesis on academic self-concept, achievement expectations and the academic locus of control among children with learning disabilities, and also looked at teachers' and mothers' expectations and perceptions of kids with learning disabilities and compared them with normally achieving children. That research got me into developing a measure of academic self-concept as there wasn't one at the time. There were measures of general self-concept which had been used quite extensively, some are still being used, but self-concept theory had already gone way beyond those general measures so we ended up designing, testing and publishing, a measure of academic self-concept.

How did all this research feed your passions?

I returned to New Zealand in 1980 and took up a position at Massey University and I had the pleasure of working with Ken Ryba who was doing his own PhD. We team-taught special education for many years after that. It was good that he was a Canadian and had been to a different university but we did have quite a lot in common. We got along extremely well and he was a great mentor for me in terms of helping me to develop my understanding, still incomplete, of special education.

I replicated the research for my PhD in Canada but in a longitudinal study over two years and then subsequently over five or six years with children at three intermediate schools. I followed a cohort of 1220 children focusing on self-esteem, self-concept, locus of control, and identifying children who would meet North American definitions of learning disabilities and looked at what was happening to them in terms of self-concept and self-esteem. Of course not surprisingly, in line with my thesis, the kids who achieved poorly in school developed strongly-held beliefs for the most part that they were no good, they were useless, they were thick.

Here I was back in New Zealand with a freshly-minted PhD in learning disabilities but with nowhere to go with it because this area did not exist. I had returned to an environment that was very different to the one I had been in for four and a half years at the University of Alberta. SPELD got to know of me and was interested in my work on learning disabilities, especially the self-concept aspects. I had published a couple of papers that were highly critical of the work in learning disabilities. That's the problem when you get into a field; you see all the warts and the ways it doesn't work. Both papers raised issues

with the field and I was quite strident and critical. I was critical throughout the 1980s because I felt SPELD was not moving with the times and the academic community had already discredited a lot of what they stood for. In hindsight I regret that I was so stroppy about it. I think I should have been more helpful rather than critical. I was probably just critical rather than constructively so. If I had to do it again I would do it differently.

The thing that bothered me most at the time was the definition and identification of learning disabilities and the psychometric approach to the identification of kids with learning disabilities, which was basically average to above average IQ assessed by the WISC--R. I was very familiar with this due to my work in Canada. Identification of LD was based on a gap between average and above average IQ and the core achievement in at least one area of achievement like reading. It was this gap between supposed potential and achievement but of course IQ tests, in isolation, do not measure potential. Other factors like major sensory problems or home life or background disadvantage have to be considered. But this view had already been discredited. I also had contributed to the literature and I knew that the Department of Education in Wellington would also disagree with this view. That's why SPELD was always moving uphill I think. The people in the Department of Education were very well read, some more so than me and they were absolutely right to not recognise learning disabilities but the regret I have is that they should have done something else. Just saying no and sending them away, and not recognising their work was not enough.

Marie Clay was totally against the concept of learning disabilities. We both appeared in a parliamentary select committee to make representations on Katherine O'Reagan's private member's bill seeking recognition of learning disabilities as a category. We both agreed for different reasons that it should not be a category. SPELD had their heart in the right place but they were going in the wrong direction and I was intensely frustrated. I knew that time would show that they were wrong but it was such a waste of energy and time.

New Zealand was moving towards non-categorical, needs-based special needs and special education, so recognising learning disabilities the way SPELD wanted didn't make sense.

I think it was difficult for SPELD because they seemed interested in my messages around self-concept so I was possibly attractive to them as a speaker because I would talk about self-concept but then I would throw in the other stuff about the problems with their view of learning disabilities. So for them it was probably a bit of a Catch-22.

With the self-concept stuff I departed from the mainstream views pretty early on, as I do right to this day. People have said that you have to fix up kids' self-concept if you want to fix up kids learning. A long time ago, taking a cognitive motivational approach to it, I said that it would not work. What we've done around self-concept is create in some schools a culture of indulgence because we think we need to focus heavily on a child's self-esteem and a child's self-concept in order for kids to be able to learn effectively, particularly kids who are not learning well and are struggling. I think the research shows clearly that is completely the opposite of what we need to do. We should have both high expectations and cognitive elements such as strategies, such as learning how to learn strategies and coupling those of personal agency and with self-efficacy. Rather than saying that it's not their fault, start by teaching how to learn for ourselves.. I think the self-esteem movement has done enormous damage, especially in special education and remedial education, because well-meaning teachers have tended to emphasise that to protect kids from failure. I think that's a huge mistake. Failure is a naturally occurring part of learning. It's how we manage failure that's the critical issue.

What are the metacognitional strategies teachers should be using?

I think one of the unfortunate parts of teacher preparation, and I am saying this as the head of a College of Education, is that there's not enough attention given to learning how to learn. Some of my colleagues would probably want to run me out of town for saying that. I mean in a formal research-driven sense around metacognition and all the bits and pieces that are associated with metacognition. There is just not enough in New Zealand schools and I believe there is enough evidence to show that that's the case. Certainly when I've run lectures or workshops on metacognition all the eyes get huge and the lights go on. People say this is the first time they've heard this and ask why they didn't get this when they were at teachers' college or why they didn't hear this when doing a course on such and such. To me it's not new; it's been evolving since the 1970s. Even today, in 2010, for a large number of teachers it is a relatively new concept. That's a real shame because kids' learning about how to learn and teachers providing scaffolding, in terms of the tool-set for how to learn, is one of the best things that teachers can do. It's far better than telling kids you're fabulous when the kids know that they're not.

Children need to be given some strategies to help with learning and then along with that a self-efficacy type message which follow on from the strategies. I guess the guts of it is asking, "Why did I do well on a particular task?" and answering it with something like, "I did well because I thought about what was required; I used the

right kind of strategy. It's not because someone told me I'd be okay or because it was easy. It's the notion that I used this particular strategy. It was something that I did that made the successful outcome." That allows a student to take credit and responsibility for their own learning to a greater extent. So you change what often happens with failure-prone kids. You change the cycle of learned helplessness. For many years I talked about that at a fairly general level but since working with Bill Tunmer on reading, I have been able to link it specifically to reading strategies. The most effective reading strategy for children learning to read is the strategy associated with word level decoding. Despite what many teachers have been taught to do in New Zealand, the research is absolutely overwhelming that effective work on the decoding strategies are necessary but not enough to develop competence in learning to read. So teaching kids to guess, to look at the picture, or to read on to the end of the sentence and go back and see what word makes sense is a dysfunctional strategy because the chances, as research shows, of a child correctly identifying a word are generally about 10% for the words that carry the meaning in text. In a paper that Bill Tunmer and I published on the relationship between self-efficacy and specific reading strategies we were able to demonstrate that there was quite a tight fit between the two. That was something that hadn't been done before. Fit-for-purpose learning strategies require that the strategies link effectively with the type of learning that is required according to the specific subject area.

How would you describe the educational research scene in New Zealand? Where do you think it should be heading?

I think educational research in New Zealand is in a dismal phase at the moment. Virtually the only funding you can get for educational research in New Zealand comes from the Ministry of Education and the MOE increasingly has tended to fund operational and policy type research which is understandable. The longitudinal research that Bill Tunmer and I did seems to be impossible now unless the MOE has some view that the outcome of the research will fit adequately with their policy settings or, if there is any chance that the research will not fit with their policy settings, then there is less chance that the research will be funded. That certainly is my recent experience.

Many other developed countries have independent research funding available for educational research but in New Zealand we don't or it is extraordinarily hard to get hold of. So educational research in New Zealand is significantly under-funded. It is no wonder that education will always struggle to do well in the PBRF league tables of subject disciplines because compared with other subject disciplines it just doesn't get the money. I think there has been an emerging problem in terms of a lot of educational research being qualitatively orientated. This in and of itself is not a problem but it has got so out of balance now, with relatively little of what we would call classic quantitative type research. Now there are faults with both research paradigms; I happened to train in the old-fashioned quantitative paradigm and there is place for both but a lot of what is called research at the moment is little more than anecdotal navel gazing that isn't really able to be generalised. Often at times, as a result of that, it adds little of use in terms of policy or contribution to educational theory

We need to correct the balance in terms of funding, we need to correct the balance in terms of methodology and I think the Ministry of Education itself needs to play a much stronger leadership role in respecting hard core, robust quantitative research which includes control groups which I know are a problem at the Ministry of Education. I know education is not medical science; it's not like other branches of science where it is easier to have a control group; however some radomised interventions or randomised trials as are mandatory in some aspects of educational research in the United States should be undertaken in New Zealand. We've got to move more towards some serious research controls, otherwise policy is going to be made, in a number of areas, based on research which has some serious flaws in it.

What is the proudest moment of your career to date?

That's a hard one, but if I focus on the research side I think my proudest achievement has been working with Bill Tunmer and bringing two areas of research together from Bill with his background in linguistics and reading acquisition and my background in cognitive motivation. This pulled two areas together to focus in on reading acquisition and the emergence of reading disability, identifying in very young children, during the reading acquisition phase, the kids who develop initial and ongoing reading problems, and identifying the strong link with cognitive self-system factors. I had been thinking about it in the 1970s during my PhD studies and talked about the link between learning theory and cognitive motivation. They were tending to run parallel and no one had really brought the two together tightly. Bill and I brought the two together quite tightly in one article in the British Journal of Educational Psychology and we were jointly awarded a prize from the International Reading Association in the United States. Our work looked at the unfolding of the link between reading self-concept and reading acquisition during the first three years of children starting to learn to read and of course the study was a longitudinal one. So from a research point of view pulling those two ideas together was waiting to happen. Bill and I clicked and we have had a very productive research, academic and personal relationship of about 23 years.

Courageous efforts are a thread of your academic life starting at secondary school and university where you succeeded against the odds, teacher opinion and the system. How do you feel that has made you focus your work in your academic career?

Bill and I have stood up against a New Zealand icon. We were critical of Reading Recovery. We have known from the work that Roger Openshaw has done in the New Zealand Archives in Wellington that showed how protected Reading Recovery was in the early days and the official records showed transcripts of discussions with various ministers including Lockwood Smith and Wyatt Creech, really wanting to protect Reading Recovery when it had initially been criticised by Tom Nicholson because the research design was flawed. That flaw never went away, it was just covered over. I am proud of New Zealand and I take the role of university academic seriously, in terms of the critic and conscience role and I think that's absolutely important. I think it's something for every academic staff member in every university to cherish and hold on to. We criticise from an informed basis, from an understanding of research, that you do so boldly where that's required and I think we are accountable. After all, the taxpayer pays us and if we think there is something wrong we have to tell them. They might not agree with it and there are a number of opinions but you stand up and are counted. In terms of taking on Reading Recovery it certainly drew the ire of some people although tackling the reading establishment in New Zealand so far has not been very successful and Bill and I despair that we have made very little impact on policy. I am amazed at some people who say that you shouldn't say things that will only rock the boat, or ask how I say these things when I'm the head of a college of education. I believe that being the critic and conscience means that's what you do. It's not about popularity, it's about expressing your views based on good research for people to think about.

INTERVIEWER PROFILE

Cath Steeghs

Cath Steeghs works as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour in the Fairfield Cluster in Hamilton. She has been part of Kairaranga since its inception and currently supports the work of Kairaranga by co-ordinating each issue.