Yesterday's Policies for Today's Schools

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Our previous editorial (Benade et al. 2018) looked at the education policy manifesto on which the Labour Party campaigned and on the basis of which it took up leadership of the new government of Aotearoa-New Zealand from late October, 2017. There we referred to a new spirit of optimism we detected in education. So far in 2018, we have seen the rolling out of an extensive review programme (Ministry of Education 2018) with a national consultation process, several high-level advisory groups, and clear signals of major changes.

Tomorrow's Schools, the policy strategy that introduced sweeping changes and a distinctly neoliberal influence in education policy, is under review by an independent taskforce. Recommendations are being developed for improvements in the early learning sector, the NCEA school qualifications system, and for using curriculum and assessment to lift learning in Years 1–10 (Ministry of Education 2018). Taken as a whole, these initiatives add up to an ambitious overall plan to re-set the early learning and schooling sectors.

At the time of writing, August, 2018, feedback is being sought on a draft national Education Vision. Schools are no longer required to collect and report National Standards achievement data, though the design, still less the implementation, of any replacement is still some way off. Our public education system, long a rightful source of national pride, is in an extended state of suspense: at the threshold of transition and change, the nature and extent of which are presently unknown.

It is now 30 years since the Picot Report (New Zealand Taskforce to Review Education Administration 1988), which was the precursor to introducing Tomorrow's Schools (New Zealand Department of Education 1988) and the inauguration of large-scale education reform based on 'market thinking' (Apple 2000). As a result, schools became pseudo-autonomous entities (for this argument see Olssen 2001, pp. 22–25), each managed by a Board of Trustees. The Department of Education was replaced by six new organisations including the Ministry of Education, ERO, NZQA and the New Zealand Teacher's Council. The deleterious effect of these changes on school effectiveness has been summed up as a loss of vital connections (Wylie 2012). Many in the sector feel battered from decades of the 'Thirty Years' War'

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on education. Without tediously enumerating regulations and systems, we wish to remind ourselves and readers of where we have been in the last 30 years, what has been lost and gained during the period of rampant neoliberalism, and why a revision of educational arrangements at the present time is justified.

The tenets of the reforms of the 1980s have affected the ways in which educators and the public think about education. The underlying project was to reproduce ‘market’ conditions in the core elements of the welfare state: social welfare, health and education (New Zealand Treasury 1987). Key to this project was the replacing of familiar terminology with economic/financial concepts. Prior to 1984, to be a ‘consumer’ of education would have been unthinkable: the notion of parents of school students being in a primarily financial relationship with teachers, schools, and indeed, with their own children, was at odds with both Maori and European traditions. Yet that is precisely the relationship that now prevails between schools and their families, and between universities and students.

Thirty years ago the idea that teachers and schools were ‘providers’ of education ‘capturing’ the benefits of the system to their own advantage was alien to the thinking of most New Zealanders, and above all to the teaching profession (Lauder et al. 1999). Yet the term ‘provider capture’—used with enthusiasm by David Lange (as Prime Minister 1984–1989 and Minister of Education 1987–1989)—had far-reaching consequences for the status and dignity of the profession. National assessment for accountability and school reform have been linked to teacher de-professionalisation (Locke 2001; Sullivan 1994). Thus, it should come as no surprise that many teachers feel treated with disrespect by politicians, policy makers, and even the Ministry of Education.

Nairn et al. (2012) went looking for precisely the effect that Rogernomics—the particular brand of monetarist economic policies advanced by Roger Douglas, the Minister of Finance in the Lange administration—might have had on the subjectivity of young people attending school in the wake of the school reforms unleashed by the Picot Report. They found their research participants enunciated the mantras of neoliberalism, mostly with conviction, even when they were quite obviously not able to carry them out. The exceptions were the Māori and Pacific students, for whom the truisms of methodological individualism sat very uncomfortably alongside their dispositions to value family and community more highly than personal wealth or recognition.

This division between individualism and wider considerations runs deep through education, even in the neoliberal era. The original Hayekian belief that there is nothing wrong with poverty—it simply acts as a spur to participation in the market and to the accumulation of wealth (Devine 2004)—sat uncomfortably with New Zealanders right from the beginning, and although they have acquiesced in the demonisation of the poor through terms like ‘beneficiaries’ and ‘dole bludgers’ (Hackell 2007), they have propelled politicians to seek to equalise the ‘playing field’ by ‘targeting’ the deserving poor—and children, generally, are seen by definition as deserving. A case in point is the policy emphasis on equalising the achievements of all students most recently through the policy focus on ‘priority students’ or groups that have been traditionally disadvantaged at school, largely understood as Māori and Pacific.

Individual attention will undoubtedly assist individuals, but can do little to remediate wide-spread and familial deprivation.

The neoliberal argument, put forward in its most distinct educational form in the 1987 Treasury Briefing papers (New Zealand Treasury 1987) and in Stuart Sexton's report (1990), is that neoliberalism, because it relies on the choices of individuals, is both blind to and respectful of difference. If this were so, the most intransigent problems of New Zealand education would have been solved by now. They are not. We now have to sort out what from our last 30 years must go, and what is worth keeping, or can be kept without at the same time preserving the injustices inherent in overly market-focused, competitive structures for education. The whole system is currently in a liminal space that is uncomfortable, but full of potential. It will take a united national effort of the highest professional and ethical standards—an undertaking we consider entirely possible—to realise that potential.

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