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Introduction—‘Nine years of National-led education policy’

Martin Thrupp

The University of Waikato
New Zealand

It is a pleasure to guest-edit this special issue on ‘Nine Years of National-led Education Policy’. As the journal of the faculty where I have worked for much of my career, I am rather fond of the *Waikato Journal of Education*. One of my earliest papers was published in the very first issue. That article was on the politics of scapegoating schools and teachers for wider socio-economic problems (Thrupp, 1995). It has been a theme that my work has come back to repeatedly and is mentioned in this introduction as well.

This special issue is also the third such collection to map the directions of Aotearoa New Zealand education policy decade by decade. The first was the result of a conference I organised at the University of Waikato that reflected on the years since the Tomorrow’s School and other reforms (Thrupp, 1999). The second, co-edited with Ruth Irwin, mainly covered the years of Labour Coalition Governments led by Helen Clark, but also provided some account of the emerging policies of the National-led Government elected in 2008 (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010). This collection overlaps that one to consider the three consecutive terms of the same National-led Government 2008–17.

Bringing such collections together hasn’t become any easier over the years. Critical analyses of education policy have been diminishing in New Zealand for several reasons including university faculties of education being restructured and reduced, a decline in educational research funding, especially for projects that are not politically on-message, the pressure on academics to publish in high-ranking international journals rather than local ones and the generally chilling effect of institutional and Government responses to academic critique.

In such circumstances, this collection of eight articles is a triumph. It starts with an article by John O’Neill on the privatisation of education that discusses the blurring of public and private in state schooling and the rise of network governance relations dominated by private sector actors. Linda Mitchell’s article is about the discourses of economic investment and child vulnerability that have become dominant in early childhood education under the National-led Government. Diane Mara writes about Pasifika early childhood education, where there has been heavy investment on participation but quality has languished and developed inconsistently. Bill Courtney from Save our Schools NZ writes on the lack of evidence underpinning the initial development of the New Zealand charter school model. An article from Peter O’Connor and Stephen McTaggart argues that the school curriculum has narrowed as a result of National Standards, discussing the impact on arts and critical pedagogies in particular. Carol Mutch examines school closures in post-earthquake Canterbury, revealing something of the human cost through the experiences of one school. Leon Benade looks at school property more generally, where school building programmes that create flexible learning spaces have been emphasised by the National-led Government. Finally, John Clark provides a



commentary article that considers how the problem of inequality of school achievement has been conceptualised in New Zealand education policy, both historically and in recent times.

Overall, it is an insightful special issue, and I touch briefly on a number of other areas in my introductory comments here. There are still gaps of course, education policies related to Te Reo me Ngā Tikanga Māori (indigenous Māori language and culture)ⁱ and those related to tertiary education perhaps being the most obvious. I use the rest of this introduction to characterise and discuss the National-led Government's education policies 2008–17.

National's approach to education policy 2008-17

Nine years of education policy is a lot to sum up and here I take a number of thematic angles:

- New developments over time.
- Continuing neo-liberalism and new privatisations.
- The politics of blame.
- Policy claims, policy processes and the use of power.
- The contestation of policy.
- An international perspective

New developments over time

The National-led Government's education policy has inevitably shifted over the nine years in response to new problems and with a need for new soundbites as well. The first term, after the 2008 election, was dominated by the introduction of National Standards, but there was also more funding to independent schools, an attempt to increase class sizes, the cutting back of adult education in schools and the announcement in April 2011 of the first education Public Private Partnership (PPP) to build two schools at Hobsonville Point in Auckland. After the 2011 election came the publication of National Standards results as part of a wider emphasis on Public Achievement Information, the introduction of the first charter schools announced in September 2013, and the 'reorganisation' of Christchurch schools. With the 2014 election and following term came 'Investing in Educational Success', the Education Council replacing the Teachers Council in July 2015, changes to the composition of university councils, the re-writing of Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum, an update of the Education Act (numerous changes including Communities of Online Learning—CoOLs), and compensatory funding shifting from being based on socio-economic census data to a risk index of individual indicators. At the time of writing, there are also possible changes to the Tertiary Education Act that will fund for-profit tertiary education providers on an equal footing to universities, polytechnics and wānanga.

There have been many more developments along the way including some that turned out to be one-off events, such as the 2014 'Festival of Education'. The reorganisation of Christchurch schools has recently been recognised by the National-led Government as deeply flawed (see Mutch, pp. 73 of this issue). But for many policies it may never be so clear what was lost and what was gained in the new arrangements, especially as the National-led Government has not been keen on scrutiny of many of its policies, discussed further below.

ⁱ Refer <http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/research-theme/te-reo-me-ng-tikanga-m-ori>

Continuing neo-liberalism and new privatisations

The Labour Government of the 1990s, led by Helen Clark, had not so much undone the neoliberal project in New Zealand education as taken some of the rough edges off it: producing “neo-liberalism with a social conscience” (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010, p. xviii). This left the door open for the National-led Government to take a more clearly neo-liberal approach and its support for such policy directions was predictable for at least three reasons. First, there was National’s previous record in education in the 1990s that had seen ‘bulk-funding’ of teacher salaries, less regulated school enrolment policies and a heavy emphasis on external accountability through the Education Review Office. Second, the new Prime Minister, John Key, a former foreign exchange dealer, was unabashed about running the country as a business—‘NZ Inc’—particularly in those areas that would not strike resistance from voters. Consider, for instance, how the government agency charged with international students, Education New Zealand, came to see its role:

Support[ing] and collaborat[ing] with New Zealand’s international education industry to develop education business products and services and deliver (sell) these to our markets. As a key pillar of New Zealand’s export economy, international education is fully integrated in to the Government’s NZ Inc strategies and Business Growth Agenda, Education New Zealand, in collaboration with its industry partners, is tasked with growing the economic value of New Zealand’s international education industry to achieve the Government’s target of doubling its current value of NZD2.5 billion by 2025. (Education New Zealand, n.d.)

Third, the Key Government had right-wing coalition partners to keep onside. The ACT party was clearly neo-liberal. The same could not be said of the other party, the Māori Party, but there was more potential for alignment than perhaps first apparent. ‘Choice’ policies had, in some ways, worked for Māori in the 1990s, allowing the establishment of Māori-medium kura schools as an alternative form of Māori education. The election manifesto of the Māori Party, although not overtly neo-liberal, included elements which could chime with a neo-liberal emphasis on educational choice and competition e.g., “The public needs to be provided with better information on school performance, including Māori and Pacific achievement” (Māori Party, 2008).

At the same time the National-led Government has usually had a pragmatic outlook, often tempering its business orientation to education rather than risk losing electoral support when it is not yet acceptable to many New Zealanders to completely privatise public services. One business commentator was recently able to claim that “National has never advocated doing away with socialism in education, health and welfare. They have just been tighter with the chequebook” (Dann, 2017).

Contentious New Zealand privatisations have tended to be framed by policymakers as being small scale or experimental rather than being rolled out in more wholesale fashion. Two obvious education examples are the three ‘bundles’ of schools built through Public Private Partnerships so far (Treasury, 2017) and the relatively small number of Partnership (charter) schools (11 thus far). To Gould (2016), this approach of using small steps was a deliberate strategy used by the Key Government 2008–16 in order to conceal neo-liberal developments:

John Key was no doubt perfectly genuine in his belief this was a New Zealand that would be acceptable to most, but he was nevertheless adept at concealing his intentions in case they were not supported. He was on occasion quite open about this.

A few years ago, the then Premier of Queensland, Campbell Newman, was contemplating asset sales to raise cash. He sought advice from John Key as to how he could get away politically with what he knew would be an unpopular measure. Key’s advice, as reported in the New Zealand media? “Do it in small stages,” he said, “and people won’t notice.”

[Key] was also pragmatic and cautious when it suited. A new policy would usually be floated in advance, then referred to focus groups so the public response could be judged. Depending on that response, the policy would be implemented or tweaked as necessary or simply abandoned. (Gould, 2016)

It may be that this is a common approach in countries like New Zealand that have historically strong public education systems. In such contested settings the work of privatisation may often get achieved through piecemeal changes that will not individually seem very important, but together and over time add up to a significant shift. In this way, aspects of public education can gradually transition to privatised provision without being so contentious.

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that ‘small stages’ educational developments like PPPs and charter schools have often still not been particularly transparent. PPPs have financial information withheld from the public in the name of ‘commercial sensitivity’. Those trying to follow charter schools’ developments have been frustrated by long delays in releasing information. The extent of privatisation may also be hidden by the nature of charities in New Zealand. O’Neill and colleagues found that in the five charitable trusts concerned with schooling that they looked at

... the amount and quality of information on their personnel, activities and finances are both limited and inconsistent. In both their for-profit and not-for-profit forms, charities claim to be contributing to the public good but there is insufficient standard information for disinterested observers to establish whether and to what extent claimed public benefits outweigh private benefits to individuals, whether charitable distributions are a reasonable proportion of annual income over time, and whether any harm is being done to existing state schooling services and the public sector as a result of greater private sector participation. (O’Neill, with Duffy & Fernando, 2016, p. xv)

Meanwhile, many privatisations are ‘hidden in plain sight’, clear enough if you go looking for them but not in the public eye, and so ‘off the radar’ for most people. They include schooling-related Ministry of Education processes of many kinds being contracted out. Finally, there are the areas where privatisation is obvious enough, such as schools contracting out teaching in areas such as sport, physical education and the arts (Powell, 2015). Here it must be recognised that more than 30 years of neo-liberal policies will have softened up the New Zealand population and educators to privatisation. There may also be particular lifestyle and historical factors that make New Zealanders relatively apathetic about privatisation of public services. I have sometimes half-joked that New Zealanders risk finding our education system became sold off while we went fishing or mountain-bike riding.

The politics of blame

One of the most serious shortcomings of the National-led Government has been its enthusiasm for seeing teachers and schools as the problem instead of acknowledging the impact of wider socio-economic issues. Such ‘politics of blame’ are common internationally and have been seen under Labour-led governments in New Zealand also, but were taken to new heights by Minister of Education Hekia Parata over 2012–17. In a newspaper opinion piece entitled ‘Socio-economic factors are often overstated’ Parata wrote:

What makes the biggest difference to a kid’s education is something every kid and parent knows—the quality of the teaching in the classroom. Other critical variables are the quality of school leadership, parental engagement and community expectations. (Parata, 2015)

Parata also claimed during Parliamentary debate following the publication of New Zealand’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results that

... analysis of those results showed that socio-economic status accounts for 18 percent of the differences seen in the student achievement data. That means that 82 percent are factors not about poverty. Decile is not destiny. (Parata, 2014)

Nevertheless, this 18 percent claim was only based on PISA's narrowest definition of family socio-economic influence. Using PISA's wider criteria that included neighbourhood and school socio-economic factors, about 78 percent of New Zealand's results became explained by socio-economic conditions.

Unfortunately, whenever the education sector considered the National-led Government to be treating schooling as a silver bullet, it undermined work on promoting achievement for 'priority learners'. By August 2017 the decile indicator is being removed and comments from the new Minister of Education Nikki Kaye suggest that she also hopes socio-economic factors will drop out of sight: "We want to change the conversation as a country to be not about the socio-economic status of a neighbourhood, but to be about teaching and learning as schools" (Kaye quoted in Dooney, 2017). A book about education and poverty in New Zealand provides another way forward (Carpenter & Osbourne, 2014). It gives many examples of New Zealand schools contextualising their practices in order to respond to socio-economic issues rather than ignore them.

Policy claims, policy processes and the use of power

One risk when trying to characterise the education policies of the National-led Government is to focus too much where policymakers ask us to look—signature or soundbite policies—while neglecting less obvious patterns. For instance, the National-led Government has repeatedly highlighted the building of new schools but much of this has just been keeping up with rampant population growth. Analysis of the 2016 budget showed that in fact spending on public services was shrinking with "tangible reductions in spending on health, education and family support" (Child Poverty Action Group, 2016). Budget 2017 provided only a little relief, 'a trickle not a tide' (Child Poverty Action Group, 2017).

There has been a similar gap between rhetoric and reality with claims around being consultative or evidence-based. This National-led Government has been especially 'tribal' with the 'Ministerial Cross-Sector Forum on Raising Achievement' being an important echo chamber in this regard. Potentially dissenting views were also removed by having members of the Education Council created in 2015 appointed by the Minister of Education rather than being elected representatives as was the case with the Teachers' Council it replaced. University Councils also lost their student, staff and union representatives in 2015.

Looking in-depth at one of the most contested education policies of the National-led Government, National Standards, illustrates a cynical use of power by politicians and senior policymakers in order to prevail. There was the repeated use of an inaccurate figure (the '1 in 5' students deemed not succeeding), the initial cherry-picking of expert arguments, the misreporting of consultation feedback, outright dismissal of early critiques, the shutting down of an unwelcome Parliamentary Library briefing paper, Ministerial criticisms of university teaching on scant evidence, hastily made up justifications for the developing policy, pressure on schools through the '78J' provision, the rise and fall of advisory groups, the lack of any wide-ranging evaluation, the dismissal of contrary research evidence, the list goes on and on ... (Thrupp, with Lingard, Maguire, & Hursh 2017). As Australian academic Bob Lingard has commented, "[T]he analysis of Kiwi Standards ... seems to demonstrate that instead of evidence-informed policy what we have here is more a case of policy-based evidence, with the political in the Kiwi Standards very much overriding research evidence ... to the detriment of the reform" (Lingard, 2017).

The contestation of policy

The campaign around National Standards was particularly feisty, a world-class example of teachers pushing back against an unwanted policy using dozens of different strategies (Thrupp, et al., 2017). But education policy has been contested under the National-led Government in many other areas as well including charter schools, ‘Investing in Educational Success’, Christchurch schools, and privatisation reforms in tertiary education.

The ‘Investing in Educational Success’ reform was particularly complicated in trying to decide the intent of the policy and in its subsequent enactment. With the primary and secondary sectors taking different stances and academics also divided, useful pressures were applied both from ‘within the tent’ and without, leading to what was possibly the best outcome in the circumstances. For those concerned about the dismantling of public education, the response to ‘Investing in Educational Success’ perhaps illustrates that doing *something* is the most important stance in the end (Thrupp, 2017a). It is also worth noting that the primary and secondary sectors have been able to find strength in unity again as they have contested more recent education funding reforms (NZEI, 2017).

An international perspective

Lewis and Lingard remind us that the Organisation for Economy Co-operation and Development (OECD) does political work at the local level as well as being a global influence. “PISA clearly demonstrates the work of the OECD ‘reaching into’ local spaces but also, and at the same time, national and subnational school systems ‘reaching out’—to the OECD, other systems and schools—to justify or legitimate particular local actions.” (Lewis & Lingard, 2015, p. 625). We have seen good examples of both of these in New Zealand (Thrupp 2017b). The month following the announcement of ‘Investing in Educational Success’, Andreas Schleicher, the OECD’s chief education spokesperson, endorsed the policy in a four-minute video on Hekia Parata’s National Party website. Watching the highly scripted video clip, it became apparent that Schleicher was willing to endorse the new policy in an abstract, non-contextualised way without entering into the controversies it was causing in New Zealand. Meanwhile when disappointing New Zealand PISA results were released in 2013, Parata told Radio New Zealand that “[t]his PISA result comes out of OECD and their recommendations of what systems need to do to improve are ones that we are implementing and I have actively been advocating and promoting.” Lingard describes this “as a classic case of what Juergen Schriewer refers to as ‘externalisation’, that is, the use here of comparison on international tests—externally generated data—to legitimate already underway government policies” (Lingard, 2017 citing Schriewer, 1990). Declining PISA results may be a burden, but the OECD also acts as a higher power that governments can refer to in times of trouble.

Global influences can certainly be seen in recent Aotearoa New Zealand education policy but they have been mediated by local history, politics and culture. How this happens is important for all New Zealand educators to understand lest we only think about global influences in the generic and abstract rather than recognising how they are playing out in our own backyard. This collection raises a particularly New Zealand version of globalised education policy discourses. Thanks to all those who have contributed and a warm welcome to readers.

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