



EDITORIAL – ‘LITE’ EDUCATION POLICY FOR ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

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No matter where they live, or what their parents do, or what colour their skin is, good schooling gives our kids choices, and puts rungs on the ladder of opportunity. Poor schooling removes those choices. (Key, 2007: 2)

... the idea that education can reduce inequalities in a direct way should be regarded with some scepticism ... education tends to reflect wider economic inequalities and these have to be tackled at source. (Giddens, 1998: 109-110)

The history of family assistance in New Zealand has been one of neglect. From post-war security when there was a meaningful and universal family benefit, low cost medical care and affordable housing, New Zealand has increasingly adopted measures designed for the poorest families only. More recently it has introduced an unfortunate degree of discrimination against the non-working poor. (St John, 2006: 8)

In recent years, politicians of both the centre-right and centre-left have very enthusiastically taken up the Ministry of Education's 'evidence-based' mantra that the quality of teaching and teacher dispositions, not family resources or circumstances, are the key policy lever to reducing educational inequalities. Earlier this year, in his first major speech on education, National's new leader, Hon. John Key, noted that up to one in five students (150,000) are not succeeding at school because of the country's ubiquitous 'long tail of underachievement'.

National's policy response comprises: 'clear national standards', 'effective assessment', and 'upfront reporting'. The logic is that by measuring individual student performance in literacy and numeracy via compulsory national testing and annual reporting against expected benchmark attainment standards, educational inequalities will be substantially reduced, educational failure eliminated and all school leavers employable.

This is hardly a novel educational improvement policy – as long ago as 1878, for example, Inspector General Habens' primary school Syllabus required school inspectors throughout New Zealand to formally test all students annually against national standards. It specified that 'the examination is to be so conducted as to enable the inspector to say of any individual pupil that he has passed, or that he has failed to pass, a given standard' (Campbell, 1941: 84). As Campbell commented, the major consequence was that: 'School Committees, education boards, the general public, and many of the teachers themselves soon came to judge a school by the "percentage of passes" it secured; and a teacher's standing and chance of promotion depended above everything else on the showing made by his pupils at the annual examination' (p. 84).

National's standards policy targets individuals; Labour's, 'at risk' groups (Māori, Pasifika, truants, those with special educational needs). At the Ministry of Education's urging, both sides seek to reduce the autonomy of classroom teachers through ever increasing assessment and reporting requirements that are needed to feed global league tables of comparative student performance (e.g., TIMMS, PISA, PERLS). The effect is much the same: in such a system, as Campbell observed more than half a century ago,

students' educational needs are subordinated to the 'austere logic' of high-stakes testing and the teacher is reduced 'to the level of the hack examination coach' who devotes the majority of his or her time to 'driving on the dunces' to pass the test (pp. 85 & 87). This was dispiritingly true of 19th century New Zealand; it has been just as true of Tony Blair's 'cool Britannia' where teacher aides, withdrawal classes and holiday 'booster clubs' are all used by anxious schools in a frenzied effort to ensure that as many borderline students as possible pass high-stakes tests in literacy, numeracy and science, to help meet government set national targets.

Yet, when all is said and done, testing and standards are irredeemably education-lite policies: both irrelevant (to young people's actual educational needs) and immoral (they conveniently ignore the effects of poverty on educational access).

Can it be mere coincidence that there are similar proportions (one in five) of New Zealand children in the Ministry's 'tail of underachievement' as there are children in the greatest poverty – that is, non-working, beneficiary-dependent families? Ministry of Education propaganda forcefully reiterates the OECD line that teachers make the most difference to children in the classroom and therefore only teachers matter: when children fail, it is the teacher's fault. While none of us would disagree that good teachers materially enhance young people's life chances, it is quite something else to imply that the effects of child poverty are irrelevant to educational access, participation and achievement, particularly as children are over-represented in the poorest four deciles (St John, 2006).

According to Susan St John (2006: 7), child poverty was not officially recognised in New Zealand until 2002 when the Ministry of Social Welfare promised it would be 'eradicated'. However, no standards, timelines or targets have been set and life outside school continues to get harsher for children in families. As St John (2006) illustrates, a family that received \$42 per week in 1986, received \$47 Family Support in 2004: 'The loss of purchasing power was such that instead of \$47 this one-child, very low income family should have been getting \$75' (p.9).

If New Zealand politicians truly want greater social equality and life chances for young people, they need to drop the education-lite policy of testing and national standards and get children out of poverty. As another 'third-way' politician once famously said: 'It's the economy, stupid'.

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