The Global Education Reform Movement, Children's Rights, and Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Education occupies a pivotal space at the intersection of the responsibilities of the State and the rights of the child. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, governments which are committed to the provision of education for children and young people are guided by ideologies of governance which set the direction and purpose for education and, therefore, construct the wider cultural political economy in which education operates (Dale, 2005). Since the 1990s, neoliberal ideologies of accountability, marketisation, standardisation, and choice have increasingly directed State logics of governance over education. Collectively, these projects have been labelled as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM (Sahlberg, 2016). As several previous *Teachers' Work* editorials have outlined, the current Government is very busy reshaping education delivery, curriculum, and governance in Aotearoa New Zealand. These reforms have not been without opposition from teachers. For instance, a new draft curriculum has been met with significant opposition from principals across the country, concerned that it sidelines *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, and appears to have been written by international contractors (Gerritsen, 2025). A challenge in our bi-cultural context is that the GERM's imperative for curriculum standardisation leaves little room for indigenous knowledges within formal schooling. The removal of an explicit commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and Māori knowledges has sparked a rejection by hundreds of principals and school Boards of Trustees throughout Aotearoa New Zealand who have issued letters to their communities to affirm their schools' commitment to *Te Tiriti* principles.

And yet, current educational reform is not only targeting curriculum. The Government's *Education System Reform Bill* (Ministry of Education, 2025) proposes significant and sweeping changes to the structure of key educational governance architecture. For instance, responsibility for administering and monitoring private education providers are moving *out* of the Ministry of Education to come under oversight by the Education Review Office, while the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand – currently a standalone professional body governing teachers' work and accreditation (cf. Couch et al., 2022) – will be folded *in* to the Ministry of Education. Each of these moves signals underlying ideological positions consistent with the GERM. Private education's separation from the Ministry of Education lays groundwork for private schools to operate with further layers of separation from government initiatives and requirements, increasing potential autonomy from State determinations about educational

content and provision into the future. Bringing accountability functions of the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand under Ministerial control will in contrast remove those layers of separation, which buffer teacher governance from governmental changes, and afford current and future governments' accountability logics greater control over teacher accreditation and initial teacher education providers' programming. These two components of the Reform Bill open the provision of education and teacher training further to market forces and reflect neoliberal imperatives of the GERM.

Another feature of the Reform Bill that contributes to the GERM's increasing logic of educational governance in Aotearoa New Zealand is its move to enable the Ministry of Education to compel schools to participate in PISA and other international large-scale assessments. As an assessment tool which ranks nations' student performance in international league tables, PISA and other such tools perform a key accountability function for governments (Cobb & Couch, 2022). PISA outcomes often drive national educational reform, signalling supranational reference points which direct and determine educational imperatives and purposes. Coupled with the current Government's apparent decision to have international contractors develop aspects of the new draft curriculum (Gerritsen, 2025), this dimension of the Reform Bill indicates an increasing use of international reference points for Aotearoa New Zealand's education system which necessarily diminish the importance of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, and privileges particular and non-indigenous forms of knowledges.

All of these reforms are driven by political ideologies which align with the GERM, redrawing the relationship between Government and education and therefore concurrently impacting the relationship between Government and the rights of children. Since ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) in 1993, Aotearoa New Zealand has emphasised the critical role education plays in maintaining children's rights. The landscape for realising these rights is complex. In 2023 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child observed that while most children thrive, too many do not experience the same quality of life as their peers and this limits their experiences in education. Educators have a long history of advocating for children's rights, ensuring every child is included, valued, and supported. Recent changes in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system, driven by shifts in Government visions, means less regulation and more accountability. New policies have significantly impacted teachers, families, and children as well as their communities. These changes highlight the importance of prioritising children's rights in educational decisions and experiences.

Overseen by a guest-editorial team, papers in this issue which examine the rights of children and education responded to a call for papers organised by OMEP Aotearoa, part of OMEP World, a global organisation focussed on children's rights. The papers foreground children's rights as a multifaceted and contested terrain within education. Rights are not only positioned as legal and policy commitments, but part of a lived reality for children, shaped by cultural, political, and institutional contexts. A key recurring theme within the papers is the need to honour the voices and agency of all children in all contexts, leveraging UNCROC as more than an aspirational framework. The papers interrogate the coloniality of rights discourses, advocate for counter-hegemonic education

spaces, and highlight the professional learning required for teachers to work effectively to uphold children's rights in educational contexts. Together, these papers reinforce the need to move beyond tokenistic gestures toward a robust, relational enactment of children's rights in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

We would like to acknowledge the guest editorial team which has overseen the review and publication of the special topic section. Our thanks go to:

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- Charlotte Robertson, OMEP Aotearoa Executive Member
- Margaret Joan Stuart, Independent Researcher
- Dr Parisa Tadi, Auckland University of Technology
- Dr Sarah Te One, Independent Researcher

The OMEP editorial team of this special issue would also like to take opportunity to commemorate the passing of Nola Harvey (1947-2024), who was a staunch champion for children's rights. She was a long-standing member of ACYA (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa) and CRAANZ (Children's Rights Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand) and actively engaged in OMEP work to promote children's rights. Nola brought courage, insight, intelligence and humour to her work as one of our most respected advocates for young children and their rights. She had the courage to stand up and speak out for children who were marginalised with a particular focus on children of refugees, language, literacy and recognition of the importance of acknowledging children's home languages. She always contributed more than was expected. She was instrumental in forming an Aotearoa New Zealand branch of the International Play Association, now Play Aotearoa, and she was a Life Member of OMEP Aotearoa and Play Aotearoa. She is sorely missed.

In closing, this issue of *Teachers' Work* marks changes within our journal, as Emeritus Professor Nesta Devine steps down from her position as co-editor. Nesta's contribution to *Teachers' Work* since taking up co-editorship in 2014 has been significant. Under her guidance, and alongside co-editors Leon Benade (2014-2021) and Christoph Teschers (from 2020), *Teachers' Work* has continued its tradition of supporting emerging and established authors into meaningful open access publication, and leveraging editorials to speak with authority into educational developments that impact the teaching profession. Nesta has carried out editorial duties in a manner consistent with her deep belief in equity, her well-honed ability to see through the spin and get at the heart of complex educational issues, and with her characteristic wit and good humour. Daniel Couch now steps into the co-editor role with Christoph Teschers, and as Kay-Lee Jones and Helena Cook continue as associate editors we believe the journal is well-placed into the future. We are grateful that Nesta will continue to support the journal as part of our editorial board.

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