

Progressive education in New Zealand: a revered past, a contested present and an uncertain future

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Abstract

In this article, progressive education in New Zealand is examined across three eras. The 'revered past' (1870s-1960s) focuses the influence of progressive ideas on the early childhood movement from the establishment of the first kindergarten in 1889 and on the schooling sector from the 1930s to the 1960s. The 'contested present' (1970s-2011) examines the attack on progressive education in schools in line with economic downturn from the 1970s onwards and contrasts this with the strengthening of the early childhood movement in the 1990s. The 'uncertain future' (2012-) looks at how current government policy is continuing to marginalise progressive ideals in favour of market-led educational decision-making but how educators are reclaiming the progressive space with the support of the wider community.

Keywords: Progressive education, education policy, education history

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To many educators around the world, progressive education in New Zealand is synonymous with the story of Sylvia Ashton-Warner teaching Māori children in a remote village using her key vocabulary method. As told in her book *Teacher* (Ashton-Warner, 1963), each child chose a word for the day – one that was important to them. It was written on card and the child carried it around, clutching it tightly as if it were a precious object. It was the epitome of child-centred teaching. Ashton-Warner was to leave New Zealand disillusioned, feeling that she and her methods were not appreciated or understood, and travel to North America. More recent scholarship, however, claims that it was precisely because of her time in New Zealand, that her ideas were able to flourish (Dobson, 2007; Middleton, 2009).

We create our ‘selves’, or identities, in particular social, geographical and cultural settings. Sylvia Henderson, a teacher in a Native School, dreamed and wrote her persona as Sylvia Ashton-Warner, novelist and educational theorist, in (and not in spite of) Pipiriki during the Second World War. The places in which she lived, dreamed, read, thought, loved, and wrote should not be seen as isolated cells or containers. Studying Sylvia Ashton-Warner as a New Zealand educational theorist – knowing her place – reveals connections between her haunted hills, classrooms and houses and wider metropolitan movements of educational thought. (Middleton, 2009, p.46)

Jones and Middleton (2009) show that infant schooling in New Zealand in Ashton-Warner’s time was already comparatively radical and progressive. There is strong evidence of the acceptance of child-centred, arts-based and innovative literacy approaches. These approaches were a product of an egalitarian and liberal-progressive philosophy that permeated social, political and educational thought and which maintains a strong legacy in New Zealand today.

The key tenets of progressive education in New Zealand are child-centredness, experiential learning, an emergent curriculum, a holistic pedagogy and the fostering of creativity. More recently, exponents of progressive education would add a focus on cultural awareness and social justice. Ideas such as these have influenced early childhood education from the establishment of the first kindergarten in 1889 to the development of the holistic early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, in 1996. In the schooling sector, they came to the fore following the Great Depression and the introduction of the Welfare State in the 1930s. Progressive ideas were spread through the New Education Fellowship, which brought influential progressive educators from Europe and the United States to New Zealand. So influential was the movement that progressive education (or liberal-progressive education as it is more often referred to in New Zealand) became the cornerstone of education policy until the economic downturn of the 1970s and the market-driven reforms of the 1980s. While progressive education methods had been coming under increasing attack since the 1960s, it was the Education Act of 1989 which signalled a distinct change in direction. This attack on progressive education has continued in more recent times with the introduction of national standards and other policies leading to the narrowing of the curriculum. This article will examine the influence of progressive education on teaching and learning in New Zealand across three time periods – the revered past (1870s- 1960s); the contested present (1970s-2011); and the uncertain future (2012-). The article will conclude with a discussion of the current state of education and the threat to New Zealand’s liberal-progressive education legacy.

Context

New Zealand is a small, relatively isolated nation in the South Pacific. Land area is similar to the United Kingdom or Japan but with a population of just over four million people, it is sparsely populated except for the major centres, such as Auckland. It is a democratic country with ties to the British queen as its constitutional monarch. New Zealand is a mainly bi-cultural society (in 2009, European New Zealanders making up 68 per cent of the population and Māori 15 per cent) with a growing multicultural population (9 per cent Asian and 7 per cent Pacific Island origin).

Schooling in New Zealand is compulsory from ages six until sixteen, although most children begin school on their fifth birthday after some form of early childhood education. Children move through each year based on social (that is, age-related) promotion rather than grade-related achievement. Primary schooling goes from Years 0-1 (five year olds) to Year 8 (12 year olds). Secondary schooling is from Years 9-13 (13-18 year olds). About 95 per cent of schools are state (that is, funded by the national government) or integrated into the state system and follow the national curriculum. The schooling sector includes a variety of options: regular primary (elementary), intermediate (middle) schools, high schools, the Catholic Education system, bi-lingual or immersion (Māori) indigenous schools, schools of special character (other religions or philosophies) and the home schooling movement. The curriculum areas for English-medium teaching and learning in Years 1-13 are English, The Arts, Health and Physical Education, Learning Languages, Mathematics and Statistics, Science, Social Sciences, and Technology. Kura Kaupapa (Māori immersion schools) and early childhood education services have their own curricula.

New Zealand always scores highly on international comparative assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) or Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). New Zealand students score significantly and consistently above the OECD average, with a high number in the top five per cent (OECD, 2012). Many would attribute this success to New Zealand's egalitarian ethos and the liberal-progressive schooling tradition.

What these international studies show, however, is that among the high-achieving countries, New Zealand has the widest dispersion of scores from highest to lowest and that while Māori, Pacific and students from low socio-economic settings do appear in the high range, they are over-represented in the lower range. It is information such as this that has caused critics of progressive education to continue to call for schools to have more accountability and less autonomy. This article will begin by placing New Zealand's progressive education tradition into its historical context before moving to the tensions inherent in the present situation and finish by discussing concerns for the future.

A revered past

Bi-cultural beginnings

The tradition of progressive education in New Zealand schools owes its establishment to the convergence of two main events – the Great Depression of the 1930s and the New Education Fellowship conference of 1937. That is not to say that progressive ideas and ideals had not made their way to New Zealand before that but the 1930s and 1940s would see them become mainstream and leave an enduring legacy.

New Zealand was first inhabited by Polynesian travellers, circa 800 AD, who arrived in Aotearoa, later named New Zealand. Māori, as they became known, lived virtually

undisturbed, except by the occasional European seafarer, until the early 1800s. Māori lived in extended family groupings and education was mainly apprenticeship style, where children and young people learned by watching, listening and doing, although there was some specialist instruction for those would take on important leadership roles.

The arrival of Europeans in great numbers, mainly from the British Isles, firstly as sealers, whalers, traders and missionaries, and later as colonists and soldiers, was to change the way of the life of the indigenous people forever. In 1840, the British signed a treaty with the Māori, the Treaty of Waitangi, in which they gave Māori the rights of British subjects in return for recognising Queen Victoria as their sovereign. The treaty was to follow a contested path and rather than protecting Māori was only to hasten their demise. The policy of assimilation meant that by the end of the 1800s, Māori had lost much of their land; their population was in decline, and their health, welfare, language and culture were all under threat (Simon, 1994). It was not until over 100 years later that the importance of this treaty was recognised as the country's founding document and legislation put in place to begin to address the various wrongs done to Māori.

Education was to play an important role in the development of New Zealand. It was seen as a civilising force through, for example, the 1847 Native Schools Act which provided vocational education for Māori to provide the new colony with domestic servants and labourers. A politician of the times claimed it sought "to bring an uninitiated but intelligent and high spirited people into line with our civilization" (cited in Bailey, 1977, p.5).

It was also a mechanism of social control, based on the industrial model of education from the homeland of the majority of British settlers, although without its rigid class stratification (Davies, 1994). Establishing universal primary education was hotly debated but, in 1877, a system of free, compulsory and secular education laid the foundation stone for the system existing today.

Schools were set initially up by churches or private individuals. By 1870 about half the population of 5-15 year olds received some education. Following the 1877 Education Act, a school syllabus was drawn up by the first Inspector General of Schools, Reverend Habens, whose ideas were described as being "more ambitious in aim than any in the British Empire" (cited in McLaren, 1980, p. 22). Naturalistic and progressive educational theories were already making their impact. The school curriculum was to include a broad base of knowledge and skills from the '3Rs', grammar and composition, to history, geography, science, drawing and music. Haben's successor, George Hogben, was to be strongly influenced by Froebel, Rousseau and Dewey:

We must believe with Froebel and others of the most enlightened of the world's educators, that the child will learn best, not so much by reading about things in books as by doing: that is exercising his natural activities by making things, by observing and testing things for himself; and then afterwards reasoning about them and expressing thoughts about them. (Cited in May, 2011, p. 37)

The classroom reality, however, was often rigid and stifling, as described in this excerpt:

The infant room was a small hall with a partition down the middle separating the girls from the boys.... The girls seldom saw the boys on the other side of the partition as infants spent most of the day immobile, wedged into little seats with wide shelves in the front for slates. (Cited in May, 2011, p.31)

Early childhood establishments (for under-fives) were also available in the new colony but originally focused more on care than education. However, with ideas from Rousseau,

Pestalozzi and Froebel filtering through, the first kindergarten was established in 1889. Montessori pre-schools would follow in the 1900s and so did other approaches in later years (May, 2007; 2011). The turn of the century was also to lessen the dominance of an elitist academic curriculum and see a comprehensive system of secondary education instituted which would provide both vocational and academic subjects to high school students in both town and country.

An egalitarian ethos

Some of the features of the current system arise from such historical precedents and their local adaptations. Many early colonists from the British Isles, for example, willingly left class divisions behind. Māori proved quick and adaptable learners of the new language and culture. A new society that would be more collective, egalitarian, and forward-looking began to emerge. New Zealand was the first country in the world, for example, to give women the vote (1893), provide old-age pensions (1898) and no-fault worker's compensation (1900).

In 1900, New Zealand became a dominion. At that time, it was seen as "one of the world's most democratic countries" (Green, 2000, p.17). The Liberal government was halfway through two decades of uninterrupted power and social reform. As May (2011, p.27) states:

By 1900, the pace of change in colonial New Zealand – for its peoples, landscape and politics – was dramatic and often traumatic. The building of a national education system that encompassed most Pakeha [people of European extraction] and many Maori children was one small part of this.

The First World War and the ensuing economic downturn were to have a profound effect on New Zealand. One tenth of New Zealand's population of one million served in World War I and one in six of those was killed. The economic decline spiralled into what we now call the Great Depression. Olssen notes that the decline was becoming obvious several years before and that the Great Depression was not the sole cause but only intensified the already visible "economic dislocation, social distress and political disorder" (1981, p. 272).

The Great Depression

As with the Great Depression in many other countries, thousands of people became unemployed or were put on welfare work for a pittance (Ewing & Hicks, 2006; Mutch, 2006; Simpson, 1984). The education sector was not immune. It was one of the areas in New Zealand to face severe cutbacks. The government excluded five-year olds from schools, prevented married women from teaching, cut teachers' wages, closed teachers training colleges, rationed chalk and paper and increased class sizes. Simpson tells of how teachers were sacked then put on relief work tidying the playgrounds

As the community felt the bite of the Great Depression, the conservative coalition government was removed from power and the Labour Party with their promises of a fairer and more just society swept to victory in the 1935 election. The developments following the Great Depression in education and social welfare were unprecedented in scale. They were in part a response to the unfairness and deprivation that had just been experienced, but they were also another opportunity to continue the liberalisation begun by earlier governments but halted by war and economic depression.

When Labour took office in 1935, they found considerable financial reserves left behind by the previous government that allowed them to undertake a programme of public works. Green (2000 p.18) outlines some of their key reforms:

After enacting progressive industrial legislation (a minimum wage, a standard 40-hour working week, compulsory unionism) it introduced a comprehensive system of social security which provided a safety net “from the cradle to the grave” for those who needed it. Private and state houses were built in the same suburbs in a flourish of egalitarian idealism. The success of the Welfare State and public admiration for the Labour Party leader were to ensure the re-election of the Labour Party in 1938.

The Labour Party was also to have a profound effect on the direction of educational reform in New Zealand for the next 30 years. The Minister of Education in the first Labour Government was Peter Fraser. In his role as Minister, and later as Prime Minister, he was responsible for much of the social reform, and through his work with Clarence Beeby, was responsible for major developments in education. Abbiss claims, “This association would facilitate educational reform in the 1930s and establish progressive education as the new orthodoxy” (1998, p.83). Many of the key members of the new Labour government had had little formal schooling themselves and saw a broad and generous education as the key to achieving their vision. Beeby, then head of the New Zealand Council Educational Research (NZCER), served on the planning committee for the 1937 New Education Fellowship Conference, which would bring the latest in progressive educational thought to New Zealand.

The New Education Fellowship

The New Education Fellowship (NEF) was an organization with its origins in Europe in the aftermath of the horror and outrage of World War I. It advocated schooling which was, “liberal, holistic and democratic and valued self-expression, dialogue and creativity” (Alcorn, 1999, p.80). Abbiss describes the NEF as providing “an agency for collaboration between educational innovators and recognition of ‘radical’ movements in education.... It stood at the ‘progressive’ edge of educational thought but not beyond the boundary of academic and political respectability” (1998, p. 81). As NEF ideas were spread through international conferences, the NZCER sought ways to bring guest speakers to this part of the world. With Fraser as Minister of Education, the New Zealand planning committee was able to gain funding from the government. The Department of Education, under the Minister’s instructions, also re-arranged the school terms to ensure teachers were free to attend.

In 1937, fourteen speakers from Great Britain, the United States, Canada, South Africa, Finland and Austria were heard by over 5,000 educators in person and by even more through radio broadcasts. Week-long sessions were held throughout the country. The conference captured the interest of educators, politicians and the general public. As Couch states, “By the closing lecture of the conference, the idea of a new education pedagogy had been introduced to mainstream New Zealand educators and public” (2011, p.). Alcorn elaborates, “Those who were there remembered the feeling of inspiration: the sense that education was of crucial importance, that it was a liberating force, that home and school would work together, that education could and should be an active process” (1999, p.84).

Several speakers were to have a profound impact on the direction New Zealand education would take. Susan Isaacs was particularly influential in the way teaching would develop in the early childhood and junior primary areas, leading to the introduction of the Playcentre movement in the 1940s. The work of Harold Rugg, opened up wider social and systemic issues which were close to the hearts of teachers after the Great Depression. I.L. Kandel challenged the narrowness of the secondary curriculum and the stifling nature of the education bureaucracy. The conference was a great success and shaped the way progressive education was to be implemented.

Progressive education reform

In 1938, Beeby took up the position of Assistant Director of Education, “a role of national importance, in which he was charged with the oversight of a government-sanctioned revolution in New Zealand education” (Alcorn, 1999, p.92).

In order to make secondary schooling (whether academic or vocational) more accessible to all students, the number of intermediate (middle) schools was increased; the Proficiency Examination, which limited entry to secondary school, was abolished; and secondary education became free until the age of 19. In primary schools, class sizes were reduced, leading to the need for more schools, classrooms and teachers. Education at this time had a sense of growth and momentum that was never to be repeated

By 1940, Fraser had become Prime Minister and Beeby was Director General of Education. Although they were to continue as a strong partnership, they are best known for the following statement from 1936. It was to become the cornerstone of educational philosophy for many years to come and one of the most quoted statements regarding education in New Zealand:

The Government’s objective, broadly expressed, is that every person whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system. (Cited in Alcorn, 1999, p.99)

The progressive classroom

Educational change cannot be achieved overnight, but Beeby was keen to give innovative educators a chance to flourish. One of the teachers he visited to see progressive education in practice was Elwyn Richardson, a teacher at Oruaiti School in an isolated part of the North Island. Richardson was to describe his teaching, from 1949 to 1962, in his book, *In the early world* (Richardson, 1964) which highlights his philosophy that the most powerful learning arises out of children’s own lives and experiences. The arts, and in particular, working with clay, were the catalyst for learning, as children moved from one expressive medium to another. Smythe (2011) summarises the start to a day in Richardson’s class:

Richardson, in describing the day’s programme, says that even before the bell rang there were many children in the classrooms. He described what some children were doing - one was reading a book; another was finishing off a large clay mask made from a mould; another was reading from an exercise book in which she did all her school work. When the children had drifted in, Richardson looked around and saw them busy on one task or other. He knew that all of them understood that soon there would be a discussion of the day’s work, which would include an evaluation of what had happened the day before. Some of the things that would happen in the day’s programme would be taught, others would happen as result of individual interests or unfinished work. Everyone was free to bring up a topic of interest.

MacDonald (2010) sees Richardson’s contribution to progressive education to be the understanding that, “learning through the arts raises students’ potential for self-knowledge, critical discernment, imagination, understanding, awareness and empathy for others, and that the arts have an important role to play in the fostering of community and social reform” (p.ix).

In the field of early childhood, progressive educators were also encouraging children to observe the world around them and use that as a basis for their learning. Sewell and Bethell (2009) describe an activity recorded at Wellington South Kindergarten in 1940, in which a

group of children built a house from a packing case as they watched a building being constructed next door:

The images tell a story of children working together in the construction and painting of a house. Immediately evident is their lack of self-consciousness and complete absorption in their work. This engagement is seen in their facial expressions and gestures, and in their failure to be distracted by the nearby photographer. A sense of connection is evident: while completely absorbed in their own part of the creative enterprise, the children seem alert to the activity of others, working harmoniously in close physical proximity to each other, and using their individual skills to complete the shared task. Their 'creative play' has become real – the children are engaged purposively and energetically in the occupations of building and painting. (p. 101)

The progressive legacy

By the 1960s and 1970s, the progressive legacy could be seen at all levels of formal education. Early childhood education in, kindergartens, play centres and other education services highlighted the importance of creative self-expression through play. Primary schools, especially in the early years, included 'developmental' time, in which children began their day by freely exploring and engaging in a range of unstructured activities before settling into more focused teacher-led lessons. Individualised reading programmes, group work, integrated units and creative activities were commonplace throughout primary schools. In secondary schools, a core curriculum ensured that for the first two years of high school, students continued to experience art, music and physical education alongside English, mathematics, science and social studies.

A contested present

Progressive education comes under fire

Dunstall calls the 1960s in New Zealand a time of "unsurpassed prosperity and social tranquillity" (1981, p. 397). There was population growth, full employment, increasing affluence and high economic aspiration. Dunstall continues:

In this most sustained period of prosperity of the twentieth century the state took on new dimensions – maintaining affluence, tempering inequalities, ensuring securities, and helping to maintain the high degree of uniformity in New Zealand life" (p. 398).

Although a commission into education in 1960 was satisfied that New Zealand education was sound in theory and practice, there was growing external criticism of education's 'playway' methods. Cumming and Cumming (1978) explain:

So much attention was given to it by the country's press that readers mistook all criticism for condemnation. It became fashionable for employers to be appalled at the declining standards of writing and spelling; they claimed that the basic standards of education had been discarded (p. 336).

At the end of the 1960s, the New Zealand economy took a turn for the worse. "The welfare state bred new problems, inflation, and with it new inequalities and new anxieties" (Dunstall, 1981, p. 398). Opposition to the Vietnam War, Māori cultural resurgence and a rising feminist movement created a "wave of protest that brought a new hue to the social fabric" (p. 428). As prosperity declined in the 1970s, solutions to the economic crisis were proposed by the business sector and education was seen as a convenient scapegoat.

In 1984, a new Labour Government came to power, its first task to deal with a looming economic crisis. The restructuring of the welfare state was the government's selected

means of reducing state expenditure. It was in this context that the administration of education was overhauled. The Department of Education and its regional boards were dismantled in favour of a centralised policy focused Ministry of Education. School governance and management was decentralised to individual schools through elected boards of trustees. While schools could make day-to-day decisions, the Ministry retained control over curriculum and assessment (Langley, 2009; Thrupp, 1999).

Education and politics

The two major political ideological forces of the time in New Zealand are described as ‘new right’ and ‘liberal left’ (Mutch, 2003a). According to Dale (1989) the new right contains two forces — the neo-liberals and the neo-conservatives. The neo-liberals want freedom for the market to dictate direction and have no particular views on right and wrong, as market forces will lead the way. The neo-conservatives want to prescribe and regulate, preferring carefully monitored accountability and old-fashioned values. The liberal left was the term coined by Barr (1997) to describe the loose amalgamation of groups and ideological positions that arose from the liberal progressive and the socially critical traditions. The socially critical tradition now encompassed the feminist and Māori cultural resurgence ideals.

Changes in direction in the school curriculum

While education was high on the reform agenda, the new Labour Minister of Education, Russell Marshall, was still of the liberal-progressive tradition (Snook, 1995). He undertook a wide-ranging curriculum review. This led to a proposed curriculum that departed in the main from traditional subject divisions. For example, it suggested organising the curriculum around integrated themes – culture and heritage; creative and aesthetic development; language; mathematics; practical abilities; living in society; science, technology and the environment; and health and well-being (Department of Education, 1987). This curriculum was never implemented and the Prime Minister, David Lange, was so determined to institute reforms from a different ideological perspective that he took over the education portfolio himself. The Prime Minister’s vision was set out in *Tomorrow’s Schools* (Lange, 1988) and the Education Act of 1989 set the reforms in motion. When the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) emerged, it clearly showed the tensions between a curriculum designed to improve New Zealand economic standing and yet drawn from an egalitarian tradition:

The New Zealand Curriculum recognises that all students should have the opportunity to undertake study in essential areas of learning and to develop essential skills. Such learning will enable them to develop their potential, to continue learning throughout life, and to participate effectively and productively in New Zealand’s democratic society and in a competitive world economy. (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.3)

A progressive early childhood curriculum

During Labour’s first term (1984-1987) economic restructuring adversely affected the early childhood sector but the government promised to deliver on its policies during its second term (May 1991). Constant lobbying from early childhood and women’s groups kept this promise to the fore. “The bonus for early childhood was ... to be swept on board a new upheaval of restructuring that it did not have to drive, just steer in the right direction” (May, 1991, p. 7).

Early childhood educators developed a set of basic principles for an early childhood curriculum. Carr and May, key figures in the process, state, “it was perhaps the first time that the word ‘curriculum’ was applied nationally to all early childhood, to all services and to all

ages from birth to school age” (1994, p. 26). This was followed by the Meade Report, *Education to be more* (1988) which, with some amendments, became the policy document *Before Five* (Lange, 1989). May was to comment that, “despite the dictates of wider political and administrative agendas, the early childhood concepts of diversity and the integration of care and education are not only intact but have been incorporated into a system which is more equitable to all” (1991, p.10). Following a 1993 draft, the final curriculum, *Te Whāriki. Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996) presented a holistic, child-centred, bi-cultural early childhood approach. While the early influences of naturalistic and progressive ideas can be seen, it also makes use of socio-cultural (Vygotsky, 1962) and socio-ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) theories and Kaupapa Māori (indigenous) concepts. *Te Whāriki* has received international acclaim. Germany, Norway and Denmark (Fleer, 2003) and the United Kingdom (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000) are countries that have taken inspiration from *Te Whāriki* when developing their own early childhood curricula.

The title *Te Whāriki* was chosen with care. Literally translated it means a woven flax mat. This metaphor works at several levels. First, at a national level, it represents all the early childhood services as a coherent whole and, in particular, acknowledges the place of Māori culture and language in New Zealand society. Second, in relation to the curriculum itself, it is an interlocking of the four underpinning principles (empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships) and the five strands (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration). Third, it represents the curriculum (or course of learning) that each child will undertake – not as a linear and structured progression but as a complex interweaving of experiences and developments.

Competing ideologies

In the schooling sector, the 1989 Education Act provided more autonomy by promoting the notion of the ‘self-managing school’ (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). This opened up opportunities within the state system for the development of ‘special character’ schools which reflected a range of religious, philosophical and pedagogical approaches. These schools could integrate into the state system, agreeing to accept state funding and teach the New Zealand curriculum while retaining their own values, beliefs or philosophies. Kura Kaupapa (Māori immersion schools) were established to meet the language and cultural needs of children graduating from Kōhanga Reo (Māori early childhood centres). The home schooling movement was also able to flourish. In the early childhood sector, as demand grew for more centres, education was seen as offering business opportunities and more private and corporate centres were established to fill the need

However, the tensions between freedom (as a neo-liberal ideal) and control (as a neo-conservative ideal) meant that the government adopted a series of accountability measures to keep a balance. The Education Review Office was established to conduct evaluations of school quality. The office’s purview was later extended to early childhood services. Schools were also required to write charters, set targets, and plan and report to the Ministry against those targets. Assessment of student learning was to become a major priority.

The rise of assessment

While the United States was implementing curriculum standards and the United Kingdom was instituting national testing, New Zealand’s primary schools managed to avoid going down the path of high stakes testing by developing a local solution. To address the question of how well students were achieving throughout the country, the document *Assessment policy to practice* (Ministry of Education, 1994) signalled the introduction of a national sampling assessment programme. This became the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP) which subjects a randomly chosen but representative sample of school

students at Years 4 and 8 to a series of assessments across the curriculum. NEMP reports provide a national picture of student achievement and progress but the identity of students, classes and schools remains confidential. In secondary schools, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement was instituted. In general, it replaced high stakes external examinations with a system of modular achievement standards, combining internal (school) assessments that are externally moderated and national external assessments at Years 11, 12 and 13. In early childhood, assessment of young children focused on recording narratives of their progress as they learned a variety of skills and concepts (Carr, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004).

Curriculum and pedagogy

The 1990s were time of rapid change in education, as schools and early childhood centres came to grips with new regulations for administration, curricula, assessment and pedagogy. The 2000s offered a time for consolidation. Smith and Warden (2010) call the time 1999-2008, 'the Third Way' mirroring politics in the UK, and in New Zealand, a time, "when under a Labour Government, there was a slight adjustment to the left, shifting education policies to promote the development of a knowledge society" (p. 59).

In the early 2000s, in order to prepare for the knowledge society, the Ministry of Education set out on an ambitious search for the evidence that would support development in key educational areas. The Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Programme was created. To date, it has synthesised relevant national and international research to produce key findings on many different topics, such as teaching and learning (Alton-Lee, 2003), teacher professional development (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007), and school leadership (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009).

The first of these, *Quality teaching for diverse students in schooling: Best evidence synthesis* (Alton-Lee, 2003), was to have a profound impact on pedagogy and curriculum. The outcome of iterative and on-going curriculum development throughout the 2000s, the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), was not only a set of learning areas underpinned by a vision and guiding principles but it also included guidance on effective pedagogy. The curriculum's vision was to prepare young people who would be confident, connected, actively involved, life-long learners. It was less prescriptive than the 1993 curriculum, focusing on descriptive statements about each curriculum area with a set of overarching achievement objectives but with freedom for schools and teachers to select the content that they felt would best help students achieve these objectives.

Pedagogically, the curriculum reframed teaching as an on-going inquiry. This inquiry has three stages: a *focusing* inquiry where teachers consider what is important for their students; a *teaching* inquiry which uses evidence from research and practice to design teaching and learning opportunities; and a *learning* inquiry which investigates the success of the teaching and the implications for further teaching (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The changing face of the progressive classroom

Despite the economic downturn, the 1970s were an exciting time in education. Challenges to social and educational theory found their way into the curriculum and classroom. New Zealand was influenced by trends from overseas – new mathematics, new social studies and Nuffield science. It also became known for its own strengths, such as the Ready to Read series, whole language programmes and reading recovery. The controversial *Man – a course of study* and the *Taba curriculum development project* from the US were to influence the development of a Form 1-4 (Years 7-10) social studies curriculum which required teachers to teach thematically and conceptually on topics such as cultural difference,

interaction, social control and social change (Department of Education, 1977). Cooperative learning, values clarification, integrated topics and activity centres were all pedagogical approaches that flourished at this time. New schools were built in open plan designs to facilitate team teaching and flexible grouping. Ruth Mansell recalls her 'language experience' teaching approach in the 1970s (Education Aotearoa, 2011):

On fine days we'd often ask some of the mothers to stay and help and we'd set off on foot to explore our locality, the digger working round the corner, the natural world, and the small scale industrial workplaces of many of their parents. We took a bucket of plaster to Petone beach, mixed it with seawater, and created plaques with shells, seaweed and driftwood. We ventured into the bush at Korokoro, found koura [freshwater crayfish] in the stream (and put them back), swung on the kiekie vines and listened to the sounds of the stream, the birds and the wind in the trees. Free of unnecessary OSH [Occupational Safety and Health] rules, we learned to be responsible and stay safe!

In the 1980s and 1990s, the freedom to teach in holistic and child-centred ways was being restricted by a new concept of curriculum. From 1993 curriculum was more prescriptive and less integrated. A lengthy curriculum statement for each curriculum area with eight levels of achievement objectives was implemented. Teachers had hardly begun to implement the new approach to one curriculum area when another document arrived. The fast pace of change and the increased level of expectation began to take their toll. Added to this, tracking children's progress across each curriculum area and the essential skills also led to assessment overload. The Ministry was to deal with these concerns by instituting an 'assess less better' approach through teacher professional development and taking a more consultative approach to curriculum development.

Over the 2000s, in an attempt to deal with the overcrowded curriculum and with an increased emphasis on formative assessment, inquiry learning became the preferred pedagogical approach. This was consolidated in the 2007 curriculum, which also returned to being a slimmer document focused on principles and concepts rather than detail (Ministry of Education, 2007). The inquiry approach was widely adopted and teachers were able to refocus on progressive teaching practices but bring these up-to-date and embrace new technologies. Here is an example from researcher field notes from a study of citizenship education in a primary school (Mutch, 2002, p.173):

As I enter the classroom foyer I am met by a welcome sign and a series of coloured labels: "*This is an inquiry classroom. Are you an independent learner? Are you excited by learning? Then this is the place for you. Your teachers are here to help you*". The foyer is set out as an extension of the classroom containing posters and displays. A digital photo of every child is accompanied by a statement about what makes them a good friend. Examples of work from their 'rules and responsibilities' unit, photos from their science trip and a written language unit, and a collage of children's personal symbols and mottoes are on display. These themes are carried on inside the classroom. Around the room are wall displays, display tables and bookshelves. Children's personal belongings are kept in tote trays and the children work around small hexagonal tables.

In early childhood education, more evidence was accruing of the importance of early childhood education for success in later life (OECD, 2001; Wylie and Thompson, 2003). A ten-year plan, *Pathways to the future – Ngā huarahi arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), was introduced and funding was provided to showcase and disseminate innovative practice. The publications report on teacher action research projects. For example, teachers from First Years Preschool describe their innovative approach to science, Otaki Kindergarten describes

how they enhanced children's *mana* [self esteem] by involving them in environmental sustainability, and Te Kōhanga Reo o Mana Tamariki explains how they set about learning traditional methods for growing vegetables. Here is an excerpt from the Bush St Kindergarten storytelling project relating to a quilt being made as part of the story of 'Grandpa Sydney' (Henson, Smith & Mayo, 2009, p.56):

One of the props used was a bed as part of the central character story of Grandpa Sydney to support children in preparing for bed at night and getting ready in the morning. There had been some issues for parents over these things. James came in one day with some quilting his mother had done for him using lots of different fabrics. James was keen to show off his gift and to talk about how his mum uses a sewing machine. The idea of a quilt for Grandpa Sydney's bed developed. James's mother was invited in with her sewing machine and all the children were invited to bring along a special piece of fabric that could be cut and sewn into a new quilt for Grandpa Sydney's bed. The pieces of fabric which came in all had a story to tell, from an old favourite T shirt to a piece of a cuddly blanket. The big picture of creating the quilt was not as important as the stories developed along the way as part of the process.

National standards

In 2008, the government changed to a National-led coalition. The previous (Labour) government had completed three terms in office. This extended period of time had allowed for more coherence in educational policy and curriculum development, although an emphasis on numeracy and literacy at the expense of other curriculum areas was already becoming apparent. The incoming coalition government included a mix of centre-right, neo-conservative and neo-liberal politicians. Almost immediately, the new Minister of Education announced the development of 'national standards' for Years 1-8 (primary and intermediate schools). National standards were seen as a way of providing parents with benchmarks against which the progress and achievement of their children could be judged and compared and a way in which teachers and schools could be made more accountable for their students' results. National standards in reading, writing and mathematics for English-medium schools (and similar standards in Māori-medium schools) set out the expectations for student achievement and progress (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The lack of consultation and speed of implementation meant the standards were met with fierce resistance from schools. Although the Ministry was able to soften the original expectations by having teachers able to make 'overall teacher judgments' using a range of assessment tools rather than a single test to determine whether a student had met the standards, this compromise was not enough for some schools who simply refused to comply. It is in this context that the history of progressive education in the New Zealand system moves from its revered past, through its contested present, and arrives in an uncertain future.

An uncertain future

Tension mounts

In 2011, the National-led coalition was returned to office. The Prime Minister, John Key, took this as a mandate to propose further education policies that would put New Zealand's liberal-progressive education under threat – charter schools, league tables and teacher performance pay. Part of the government's justification for its policy direction is New Zealand's performance in international comparative studies, such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS. In the Foreword to the *2010-2015 Statement of Intent* (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.2) it states:

New Zealanders are rightly proud of our education system. We are home to some of the best schools, the best teachers and the best students in the world. But the gap

between our high performing and our low performing students is one of the widest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and this government is determined to address underachievement in our schools, and to drive improved educational performance right across the system to improve education outcomes for all New Zealanders.

Other justifications are provided on economic grounds, especially given the global downturn. Recent policy decisions have included closing some special education schools and technology units, lowering qualification expectations for early childhood teachers and increasing class sizes across the board.

In 2013, charter schools are still on the government's agenda. They will receive government funding but will not be bound by regulations about class size, teacher pay, curriculum or assessment. Teacher unions, school principals, and academics are speaking out against this policy. Their arguments are that the New Zealand schools already perform well, the freedom to establish schools of special character currently exists and that if the government really wants to take quality seriously, assisting state schools to do this should be its first priority (O'Connor, 2012).

In the most recent standoff between the government and educators, the government was forced to back down on one economically-driven policy. There was widespread outrage at the government's announcement to increase class sizes. As would be expected, teacher unions, principal associations, students and academics opposed the policy. This time, they were to be supported by unexpected allies – parents and school boards of trustees. With fear of losing electoral support, the government has not moved forward on that policy and instead is focusing on policies that one political commentator considers will be more divisive:

And his [the Prime Minister's] strategy here is to break up the unprecedented coalition between parents and teachers over class sizes. Nobody can remember a time when all sections of education banded together with the parents to defeat the government. National could usually rely on its middle-class supporters to back it against teacher unions. So now it needs to its parents back again – and league tables might do it. (Hubbard, 2012, p. A14)

Progressive education despite the odds

And yet, despite the government's overt push for standardisation, many classrooms still exhibit progressive ideals – whether through an inquiry approach, an integrated curriculum or education outside the classroom. Trevor Thwaites, a teacher educator, recounts visiting a class where an arts-based curriculum was to the fore. It gives us heart that progressive education is alive and well (Thwaites, 2012, p. 110):

I first encountered Ruth Round's teaching programme in 2009 when, on a visit to her central Auckland primary school, I was treated to two hours of written and oral expressive language development in a Year 4 class motivated through music-centred learning. When I returned to the school in 2010, enthusiastic children showed me their graphic representations of John Williams' 'Fawkes the Phoenix' (from the film soundtrack to *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*), followed by more representations of sound poems and original poetry. As the music played I noticed the children were responding in a variety of engaged ways: conducting, shaping the musical lines with physical gestures, singing some of the quite complicated themes, or just sitting and quietly swaying to the pulse.

Progressive education and the future

New Zealand's liberal-progressive education tradition has served it well. It was a tangible expression of New Zealand's developing identity which aimed to foster an egalitarian ethos within a bi-cultural society. From the early days of New Zealand's formal education system, forward-thinking educators and policy makers have sought to make classrooms and early childhood centres more child-centred, relevant, engaging and inclusive. At various times, aspects of New Zealand's education system have been admired and even emulated by other countries. Sometimes ideas that have flourished in New Zealand's more open system have not met with such success in other settings. Education systems are complex amalgams of a particular society's historical, social, political, cultural and economic contexts. This article has outlined some of the key events and people that have shaped the New Zealand system as it is today. In a recent review of the New Zealand's assessment and evaluation systems, conducted by the OECD, the reviewers remarked on features such as high levels of school and teacher autonomy and unique local solutions to the many problems besetting education globally (OECD, 2012). The report had this to say (p. 9):

Since the establishment of self-managing schools in 1989, New Zealand has one of the most devolved school systems in the world. Average student learning outcomes are very good by international comparison even though there are concerns about the proportion of students that are not performing well. ... As part of the national strategy to achieve [their] goals, New Zealand has developed its own distinctive model of evaluation and assessment characterised by a high level of trust in schools and school professionals. There are no full-cohort national tests and teachers are given prime responsibility to assess their students' learning. Teachers also have a good degree of ownership of their own appraisal and are involved in school self-review.

The concern for the education community is that this high degree of trust in schools and teachers has been hard won and is constantly under threat. The notion of what constitutes quality and equity in education is highly contested. As this article has shown, the debates in New Zealand are not only philosophical but ideological. Educators often find themselves buffeted by the winds of change driven by politicians responding to economic rather than educational concerns. Often policies use education as a driver of change – sometimes these changes are a good fit with longstanding views of the place and purpose of education as espoused and practised by educators of the liberal-progressive tradition, sometimes not.

The New Zealand system has been able to embrace progressive educational ideals and keep them alive in the face of on-going, and often unwarranted, criticism. However, without decades of committed and conscientious educators, who have managed to win and hold the respect of generations of students and parents these ideals could have been lost under a tide of market-driven reforms. It is heartening that parents and school boards of trustees have felt the need to support teachers when the values and principles the system is built on come under threat. It is this collective dedication to the children and young people of today and tomorrow that gives hope that progressive ideals will continue to underpin educational practices in New Zealand for many years to come.

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