

Bronwyn E. Wood and Joanna Higgins

# Complex Education Policy for Complex Times?

## Introducing this special issue

Any glance at education in New Zealand right now reveals a multitude of issues. In the schooling sector the declining rates of literacy and numeracy have been in the news, following a 2020 UNICEF report which found that only 64.6% of Aotearoa New Zealand 15-year-olds had basic proficiency in reading and maths (Hood and Hughson, 2022). Covid-19 has had a negative impact on students' wellbeing and also contributed to significant declines in learning, especially for lower decile schools and children in Auckland (Education Review Office, 2021). While students' wellbeing

has improved somewhat in 2023, the loss of learning is still significant, with more than half of principals reporting concerns with writing, and growing behavioural issues and inequalities in student achievement (Education Review Office, 2023). Covid has also had an ongoing impact on attendance, with regular attendance still only around 51% in mid-2023 (Devine, Stewart and Couch, 2023; Education Review Office, 2023). Early childhood, primary and secondary teachers have been involved in protracted strikes and pay disputes in the first half of 2023, citing burnout, workload and staff shortages as current issues (McCulloch, 2023). And in the tertiary sector, alongside deficits (\$86 million) facing Te Pūkenga, the new national polytechnic, as many as five of the eight New Zealand universities are facing deficits and staff and programme cuts following the fall in international and domestic student numbers during the Covid-19 pandemic and in 2023 (Gerritsen, 2023).

---

**Bronwyn Wood** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. She researches and lectures in education policy, with a focus on citizenship and social sciences education as well as areas of youth participation.

**Joanna Higgins** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. Her research interests include system-level policy implementation, with a focus on mathematics education.

While it is hard to say exactly why these problems have emerged to such an extent right now, it is clear that education policy plays a crucial role in explaining both where we are at, and where we are going.

Explanations of the current situation frequently include reference to multiple global crises. However, Max Rashbrooke (2023) recently warned of overclaiming a ‘polycrisis’ that includes the challenges of the pandemic, climate change and democratic governance, among others, and reminds us that our times are not radically different from previous eras, such as the first part of the 20th century, when major challenges were encountered and worked through.

In this special issue of *Policy Quarterly*

2017). In a classic study of school-based policy implementation, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) found that identical policies were interpreted and ‘translated’ in completely different ways in four British secondary schools – and with differing levels of success – according to local school culture, teacher beliefs and local contexts. So, while policy change may appear to be the ultimate solution for an educational issue, this study reminds us that policies merely ‘create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set’ (Ball, 1994, p.19). And as Lucas (in this issue), a principal of a large state secondary school in New Zealand for

With this in mind, we turn to some of the complex educational policy issues raised in this special issue.

One of the most enduring issues is the persistent inequalities that sit within and across New Zealand’s education. Despite the famous statement of C.E. Beeby, our longest-serving director of education, and Minister of Education Peter Fraser in 1939 that ‘every person, whatever his 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’, New Zealand education has never been entirely equal, nor entirely free. John O’Neill takes up this often-cited quote and asks the question: ‘can [this] statement still serve as an aspirational and inspirational call to action?’ For, despite the Beeby-Fraser ideal for education to be a public right for all, the principles of neoliberalism and ideas of education as a ‘private good’ and an ‘economic good’ have become pervasive.

In New Zealand, neoliberalism has taken a particular shape as a result of the Tomorrow’s Schools policy since 1989 and the associated quasi-marketplace competition it established between schools. As Barker outlines, Tomorrow’s Schools has led to high levels of local autonomy in New Zealand schools, but has also opened up schools to competition, marketisation and growing inequalities. Even the professional development offered to teachers today is marketised under this model and schools can pick and choose between facilitators and professional development directions (Smardon and Charteris, 2017), thus undermining any potential for cohesive messaging to teachers. Barker and O’Neill both look at the review of Tomorrow’s Schools (2018–19), which offered a chance to rework this deeply competitive model through substantial ‘cultural and structural transformation’ (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019, p.11) in school governance, resourcing and structures. Both, however, reflect soberingly on this missed opportunity which resulted in a ‘reset’ rather than a ‘restructure’.

Education appears particularly prone to adopting new fads – and small nation states such as New Zealand appear even more capable of rapid (and often uncritical)

## In New Zealand, neoliberalism has taken a particular shape as a result of the Tomorrow’s Schools policy since 1989 and the associated quasi-marketplace competition it established between schools.

we invited authors from across different sectors to reflect on some of these contemporary education policy issues from their perspective as educational researchers, principals, policymakers and educational experts. Our intention was to interrogate contemporary education policy issues and contribute evidence-based and thoughtful reflections that could address the current ‘gaps’ in the research–policy–practice nexus.

We recognise at the outset that while it is easy to poke sticks at education and find problems, it is so much harder to fix it. Education issues are highly complex and require complex policy solutions. Education institutions sit within highly varied social, cultural and demographic communities and are in many ways microcosms of these communities, with all of their strengths and challenges (Mutch, 2006). In addition, successful policy outcomes depend not only upon designing good policies, but also upon managing their implementation (Bryk et al., 2015; Le Fevre, 2020; Viennet and Pont,

22 years, reminds us, the ‘churn’ of constant policy change is highly challenging and a strong and productive relationship between policymakers and school leaders is vital if a policy is to succeed.

In addition, policies can have completely unintended outcomes. A recent New Zealand example was the Better Public Services targets of the John Key National government, which aimed for 85% level 2 NCEA pass rates of all school students (Public Service Commission, 2018). While this policy appeared to advocate for higher student attainment, the unintended consequence was that schools became cleverer at shifting students towards ‘lighter weight’ achievement standards, which led to higher success rates in level 2 NCEA almost every subsequent year between 2011 and 2017 but, in sharp contradiction lower rates of University Entrance (Collins, 2019). This illustrates how education can be ‘gamed’ when encouraged by perverse policy. Unless policy also creates incentives for intended behaviours, it also fails.

adoption of ‘new’ ideas (Stray and Wood, 2020). For example, our schools’ rapid adoption of digital technology across the education sector has led to New Zealand teens being some of the highest users of the internet in the OECD, with only Denmark, Sweden and Chile higher than their average of 42 hours per week online (Gerritsen, 2021). Data is now emerging that shows that aside from a few specific situations, device use at school is generally associated with poorer academic outcomes, even after accounting for students’ backgrounds (Sutcliffe, 2021). Policymakers would do well to ‘wait for the evidence’ before promoting the latest shiny new thing – as Dodgson highlights here in his critical essay on the rapid development of

artificial intelligence in the form of ChatGPT during the past year. In this article he reflects that while ChatGPT gives the perception of intelligence, it merely predicts what the next word will be. He cautions that humans’ propensity to anthropomorphise makes us gullible – susceptible to believing that this technology is delivering something that it cannot.

Not all that is happening in our education system is bad news. The revitalisation of te reo Māori in kōhanga reo, kura, wānanga, mainstream schools, polytechs and universities is something well worth celebrating. Mercury outlines how far Māori language policies have come since the 1970s, and reflects on what it might take to provide all New Zealand

schoolchildren with the ability to learn te reo. Using a ‘future-focused’ policy analysis, she anticipates the incremental steps it might take until this becomes exactly the ‘right thing’ to do. As her article shows, policymaking requires strategy, ‘radical incrementalism’ (Halpern and Mason, 2015) and courage.

As the articles in this special issue attest to, educational issues are complex and there is no silver bullet. Effective education policy matters and the future of our society and economy depends on tackling these enduring and emerging issues in ways which preserve human-centred education and create greater educational equality, outcomes and wellbeing for all students.

## References

- Ball, S. (1994) *Education Reform: a critical and post-structural approach*, Buckingham: Open University Press
- Ball, S., M.E.G. Maguire and V. Braun (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: policy enactment in the secondary school*, London: Routledge
- Bryk, A.S., L.M. Goetz, A. Grunow and P.G. LeMahieu (2015) *Learning How to Improve: how America’s schools can get better at getting better*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Education Press
- Collins, S. (2019) ‘NCEA pass rates drop slightly and ethnic gaps worsen’, *New Zealand Herald*, 29 April, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/ncea-pass-rates-drop-slightly-and-ethnic-gaps-worsen/BVY7RCQEVUSPMNCBR5ACNXMTZE/>
- Devine, N., G.T. Stewart and D. Couch (2023) ‘And slowly to school ... Reflecting on recent school attendance reports’, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 58 (1), pp.1–4, doi:10.1007/s40841-023-00286-3
- Education Review Office (2021) ‘Learning in a Covid-19 world: the impact of Covid-19 on schools’, <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/learning-in-a-covid-19-world-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-schools>
- Education Review Office (2023) ‘Long Covid: ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools and learning’, <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/long-covid-ongoing-impacts-of-covid-19-on-schools-and-learning>
- Gerritsen, J. (2021) ‘New Zealand teens among world’s biggest internet users’, *Stuff*, 10 May, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/300303738/new-zealand-teens-among-worlds-biggest-internet-users>
- Gerritsen, J. (2023) ‘Majority of universities report deficit for 2022, call for government to reinvest savings’, *RNZ News*, 9 June, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/491634/majority-of-universities-report-deficit-for-2022-call-for-government-to-reinvest-savings>
- Halpern, D. and D. Mason (2015) ‘Radical incrementalism’, *Evaluation*, 21 (2), pp.143–9, doi:10.1177/1356389015578895
- Hood, N. and T. Hughson (2022) *Now I Don’t Know My ABC: the perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand*, [https://theeducationhub.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Now\\_I\\_dont\\_know\\_my\\_ABC\\_final-1.pdf](https://theeducationhub.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Now_I_dont_know_my_ABC_final-1.pdf)
- Le Fevre, D. (2020) ‘Complex challenges in policy implementation’, *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 24, pp.192–202, <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/nzaroe/article/view/6564>
- McCulloch, G. (2023) ‘Why kindergarten teachers are joining the nationwide strike’, *Stuff*, 15 March, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/300830321/why-kindergarten-teachers-are-joining-the-nationwide-strike>
- Mutch, C. (2006) ‘Adapting Bourdieu’s field theory to explain decision-making processes in educational policy’, in V. Vanfara and N. Mertz (eds), *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Public Service Commission (2018) ‘Better public services’, <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/publications/better-public-services/>
- Rashbrooke, M. (2023) ‘NZ is having a bad moment – but it won’t last’, *Post*, 12 July, <https://www.thepost.co.nz/a/nz-news/350027616/nz-is-having-a-bad-moment-but-it-won-t-last>
- Smardon, D. and J. Charteris (2017) ‘Raising the bar for teacher professional learning and development? Or just cruel optimism?’, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 52 (1), pp.177–83, doi:10.1007/s40841-017-0075-2
- Stray, J.H. and B.E. Wood (2020) ‘Global-local education policy dynamics: a case study of New Zealand and Norway’, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64 (2), pp.256–69, doi:10.1080/0313831.2018.1541818
- Sutcliffe, R. (2021) *PISA 2018: digital devices and student outcomes in New Zealand schools*, Wellington: Education Counts, <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/pisa-2018-digital-devices-and-student-outcomes>
- Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce (2019) *Our Schooling Futures: stronger together | Whiria Nga Kura Tuatintini*, <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/assets/TSR/Tomorrows-Schools-Review-Report-13Dec2018.PDF>
- Viennet, R. and B. Pont (2017) *Education Policy Implementation: a literature review and proposed framework*, Paris: OECD Publishing, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-policy-implementation\\_fc467a64-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-policy-implementation_fc467a64-en)