John O'Neill

The Beeby-Fraser ideal is it time to abandon it?

Abstract

In 1939, C.E. Beeby, the director of education, alongside the minister of education, Peter Fraser, made a statement that has endured in New Zealand educational folklore: that 'all persons, whatever their ability, rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, have a right as citizens to a free education of the kind for which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers'. This has underpinned aspirational visions of inclusive and egalitarian education in the past 80 years, but to what extent has this vision been realised, and is it still worthy of being an inspirational call to action? In this article, this statement call for a socially just education system is revisited, especially in light of the review of Tomorrow's Schools (2018–19).

Keywords inclusive education, Beeby, Fraser, Tomorrow's Schools, social justice

John O'Neill is Professor of Teacher Education at Massey University. His research interests include the relationships between education policy and teachers' work and learning.

Introduction

> The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is 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. 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. (Fraser, 1939, pp.2–3)

In his speech to an education sector conference in 2003 about the fifth Labour government's policy statement, *Education Priorities for New Zealand*, the associate minister of tertiary education, Steve Maharey, observed that the government had drawn on the famous 1939 Beeby-Fraser statement (above) to challenge the prevailing ideology of marketisation and commodification of education. He glossed the statement by noting that Beeby was a visionary thinker and that 'his famous quote establishes a public good and right-of-citizenship basis for the education system' (Maharey, 2003). In 2018, launching the first of two national participatory democracy-style summits to 'co-design a common vision for the future of education and learning' for the next 30 years, then minister of education in the sixth Labour government, Chris Hipkins, similarly channelled the Beeby-Fraser statement and its origin story as a major

inspiration for the Education Conversation | Kōrero Mātauranga.

In 2023 it seems clear that, irrespective of the wording of any idealised vision for education, it is now firmly positioned as both a public and private good by governments of the centre-left and centre-right. Various groups in society continue to argue vocally for an education that better fits their particular needs and aspirations, and the extent to which there is a commonality of vision for education is highly debatable. It therefore seems appropriate to question the assumptions that underpin the education system as it is being enacted today, rather than as it was imagined to become in 1939.

Should state education be free at the point of use? Should it be a common state education for all children and young people? And should it be provided solely by the state? In the decades following the Great Depression and the Second World War, as our modern welfare state emerged, the answer to all these questions seemed to be an unambiguous 'Yes'.

Over the last 35 years, views have changed. We have a workfare not a welfare state. Government now provides a partial subsidy towards the cost of early learning, schooling and post-compulsory education, while the proportion of user pays charges increases year by year. The politics of race, culture and faith demand highly differentiated approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Devolved governance, decision rights and fundraising imperatives have led to a constant questioning of the authority of the state.

So, can the famous Beeby-Fraser statement still serve as an aspirational and inspirational call to action? If not, with what shall we replace it?

The review of Tomorrow's Schools

Four years ago, the final report of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, *Our Schooling Futures: stronger together | Whiria ngā kura tūātinitini*, made only one oblique reference to the famous Beeby-Fraser statement, and that to the second sentence of the statement, not the first. The report stated as its first premise that te Tiriti o Waitangi and the rights of the child must be foundational to the governance, management and administration of the schooling system; that this 'cannot be allowed to remain a pious platitude'; and that the schooling system needs to be 'reoriented' so that learners/ākonga and their whānau are at the heart of decision making (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019, p.4).

> Beeby concluded … by saying that 'since I cannot comment on both left and right, I shall comment on neither, except to say that whichever policy wins, if it lasts long enough it is destined to become a myth' …

Further on, the report reiterated that te Tiriti o Waitangi was both a moral and practical foundation of the schooling system. And further on again, that the 'legacy of system failure to invest the necessary resources in achieving equity and excellence for all learners/ākonga is an education debt that we must commit to repay' (p.13). The report acknowledged that 'there is no quick fix to addressing the disparities in educational outcomes that schooling has contributed to. Significant system transformation is required' (ibid.). The overview concluded with the judgement that, given the state of the schooling system in 2018, it would take 'five to ten years to build the capability and capacity required' (p.6). It was hoped that the report's recommendations would help build a workable consensus on core aspects of the system, and promote a harmonisation of schooling policy development, resourcing and implementation.

But there was also a realpolitik in the report's commentary. It acknowledged that '[t]oo many people in the schooling system do not trust each other or understand the contribution that each makes to the whole' (p.4); that the system lacks a middle layer that sits between central government and the schools; that 'schooling policy and system change have for too long been driven by partisan politics and a three-year electoral cycle'; and that '[w]e also attempt to do far too much change at the one time' (p.5). In other words, the system is atomised, structurally and relationally, and so does not encourage or permit meaningful learning by the social actors within it.

Even allowing for a global pandemic, the consequential effects of a new European regional theatre of war, and multiple cataclysmic weather events locally, four years on from the taskforce's final report it seems reasonable to ask whether there is evidence of a reduction in pious platitudes and a reorientation of the system as a whole towards greater fairness, equity and justice. Where can we see signs that we are actively building the capability and capacity we need to repay our legacy education debts? Are we any closer to trusting each other or understanding the contribution that each of us makes to the whole? Do learners and whānau now have foundational decision rights that materially shape their educational experiences?

More broadly, in terms of those in our society who have benefited most from the structural adjustments of the 1980s, and who have had their socio-economic and ethnocultural privilege even more deeply entrenched over the last several decades: do they accept that ensuring for all the right to a free education for which one is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of one's powers, requires them, morally and practically, to give up some of their now multi-generational schooling gains? Moreover, what does it say about our education system settings when advancing justice has to rely on the most privileged in society agreeing to give up the advantages

they were never intended to acquire in the first place through the Tomorrow's Schools reforms?

Beeby concluded his 1992 *Biography of an Idea* (i.e., the myth of equality of opportunity) by saying that 'since I cannot comment on both left and right, I shall comment on neither, except to say that whichever policy wins, if it lasts long enough it is destined to become a myth' (Beeby, 1992, p.304). He was referring to the periodic pendulum swings in education sentiment (from conservative to progressive and back again) across the professional education polity and civil society that he had witnessed since leaving the directorship of the former Department of Education in 1960. Beeby also commented on the observation of a later director general of education, Bill Renwick, that the goal of 'equality of opportunity' of the early Beeby years had since been displaced by the goal of 'equality of results'. But in Beeby's view neither of these goals addressed the central question: 'What weight shall be given to the respective claims of the rights of the individual and the rights of the community?' (ibid., p.300).

Today we have the advantage of being able to look back at a further 30 years of myth-making efforts and attendant rhetoric about educational goals. At first glance, we certainly seem still to be obsessed with the goal of equality of results, and to have elevated the claims of the individual way over and above those of the community. Just as significantly, we appear to be struggling to accommodate the recognition demands of an increasingly fragmented and heterogeneous society amid a diminishing resource base to provide the public services required to address those disparate demands (see Barker in this issue for more on the history of Tomorrow's Schools).

The interim taskforce report in 2018 attempted to argue for a substantial rebalancing of the system and its administration from the rights of the individual towards the rights of the community (i.e., not the individual school). Unfortunately, based on the weight of feedback from the public consultation phase of the review, the final report pragmatically had to concede that the community – or at least its most vocal and activist lobbies – was not yet ready to accept that the system was so unequal and so inequitable, so unjust that a radical transformational shift was needed (i.e., the system works well for most students so 'don't throw the baby out with the bathwater'). On that basis, we have to consider the likelihood that the shared core assumptions (albeit in different proportions) of both the political centre-right and centre-left have won out and become the hegemonic governance, management and administration education myth for our age – effectively a blend of quasi-market liberalism and New Public Management steerage mechanisms.

To return to the statement and the myth, we would do well to consider the likelihood that its continuing appeal lies both in its semantic abstraction and the consequent moral and practical wriggle room it grants to actors in all parts of the education system.

If the assumptions and operational mechanisms of neoliberal structural adjustment in education are not in fact widely questioned, but instead at least tacitly accepted by a silent majority, then the only option is to attribute any inequalities of opportunity and results to the failings of some of the system actors and their interactions – some governments, some state agencies, some local communities, some educators, some families, some learners. But the corrosive problem inherent in that sort of analysis is that without enough of the shared social capital of relationships, confidence and trust, each of us ends up blaming some 'other'.

For instance, when we chant the mantra that 'the system' does not serve certain groups of learners well, are we speaking of the need to transform the marketised public education system, or the panoptic compliance system of New Public Management planning, monitoring, review and audit, or the system of social transfers so that it reduces rather than increases the number of people forced to live precarious lives? Or, more likely, are we simply pointing the finger at what we see as the performative shortcomings of someone or some group other than ourselves?

To return to the statement and the myth, we would do well to consider the likelihood that its continuing appeal lies both in its semantic abstraction and the consequent moral and practical wriggle room it grants to actors in all parts of the education system. From the perspectives of fairness, equity and justice in education, therefore, the statement's greatest strength may also be its greatest weakness. As Michael Couch has observed:

> Beeby's vague myth of equality of opportunity can, retrospectively, partially explain why there has not been more egalitarian reform throughout the twentieth century. The apparent contradiction arises from the observation that a vague myth like Beeby perpetually put forward was able to be used as a catch-all phrase for any reform in the decades following his Directorship. That is, by embracing the myth of equality of opportunity subsequent governments could evade having to made [sic] specific, measurable reforms because of the inherent vagueness in the myth … The outcome of Beeby's mythmaking has been to provide a way for governments to make a range of promises without necessarily having to

> demonstrate deep-seated commitment to educational equality. It has also enabled non-egalitarian reform to be enacted in the name of equality. (Couch, 2017, p.197)

Couch's approach to Beeby's directorship might reasonably be described as dispassionately critical, not deferential or instrumental, and the insights it provides may be rather unsettling in professional education circles where, for many of a liberal social democratic persuasion, the Beeby-Fraser statement remains both touchstone and cornerstone of one's commitment to freely available public education.

A socially just education system

In part, Couch's proposition is alerting us to what the American philosopher and critical theorist Nancy Fraser refers to as the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma' in pursuit of justice (Fraser, 2008a), where redistribution concerns the economic structures that deny people the resources they need to interact and participate fully with others, 'in which case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution'; 'On the other hand,' she writes, 'people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition (Fraser, 2008b, p.277).

A practical dilemma arises, says Fraser, when individuals and groups need both (economic) redistribution and (cultural) recognition in order to remove the structural obstacles that perpetuate injustice. Furthermore, she notes that a feature of contemporary political struggles for justice is that 'identity-based claims tend to predominate, as prospects for redistribution appear to recede. The result is a complex political field with little programmatic coherence' (Fraser, 2008a, p.13).

Fraser suggests that, for the most part, as a society we have opted for the safety of affirmation rather than the uncertainty of destabilisation that system transformation requires. On Fraser's schema, affirmation in a distributive justice sense involves the liberal welfare state 'making surface reallocations of existing goods to existing groups which supports group differentiation but can also generate misrecognition' (ibid., p.34). Affirmation in recognitive relations comes in the form of multiculturalism and involves 'surface reallocations of respect to existing identities of existing groups while supporting group differentiation' (ibid.). But affirmative forms of redistribution and recognition can generate conflict and work at cross purposes when acted on simultaneously (e.g., the targeted allocation of resources to previously unacknowledged and excluded groups, which generates accusations of unfairness to the majority and deficiencies in the groups). It seems to me that this is the danger we find ourselves in following the review of Tomorrow's Schools: that we simply affirm surface reallocations of existing goods, and accord surface allocations of respect to those groups that do not enjoy parity of esteem or equal moral worth, without addressing the deeper education structures that continue to generate those economic injuries and cultural insults, as Fraser puts it.

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Fraser defines justice broadly as 'parity of participation':

> According to this radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (Fraser, 2008b, p.277)

On this view, justice requires transformational redistribution, recognition and representation in order to overcome institutionalised injustice. Affirmative redistribution, recognition and representation also serve to leave power in the hands of dominant groups to grant or withhold these surface allocations of goods and respect as they see fit.

Conclusion

I suggest that we know perfectly well what is required to remove structural and institutional obstacles to overcoming existing injustices in education; there is just not the necessary political or civil society will to make the necessary transformative changes. As people with a working interest in education, we may also be committed to doing far more than simply affirming those who are prevented from participating on a par with others. However, the realpolitik issue is how do we persuade the most advantaged groups and communities in society who continue to benefit both from the current education system settlement, and from what Michael

Sandel (2020) calls 'the tyranny of merit' that defines success today, to give up their individual family privileges in order to advance broader and deeper community justice? And in this regard, is the Beeby-Fraser ideal more help or hindrance?

In the real world, the last four decades have seen society becoming ever more polarised, and its public institutions ever more degraded under the combined effects of quasi-markets and New Public Management controls, despite the overwhelming evidence of their harmful consequences for the most disadvantaged sections of society. This suggests that it would be futile to attempt to create a 'veil of ignorance' from behind which already advantaged families in society help design the policy settings for an imagined fair and just education system without knowing whether they and their children will be among those who mostly do very well in it, or those who do not (Rawls, 1972). Yet this is not all that different from what both the Kōrero Mātauranga and the review of Tomorrow's Schools attempted to do in their intent and approach: co-design and redesign for the collective good. Arguably, the intent and the approach were naïve because they assumed that the most advantaged families and groups in society would be prepared to propose and accept changes to a system that could compromise the considerable privileges that the schooling status quo confers on them and their children.

Something more ambitious that destabilises status quo privilege and advantage is needed if justice is the end. For example, the interim taskforce report recommended a doubling of equity funding allocated using the new Equity Index to the most disadvantaged schools to 6% of total resourcing, applied across operations, staffing and property. The final report recommended increasing this to 10% of total school funding in order to achieve meaningful change in existing inequalities of educational outcomes. The government has since taken first steps to proportionately increase operational equity funding to schools and to consider the feasibility of extending the Equity Index to early learning services. Such affirmative action may, over time, reach the point where it can be evaluated as 'radically incrementalist' public policy that works (Halpern and Mason, 2015). On Nancy Fraser's view, however, such policies and actions can never be transformative because, essentially, they would leave unaltered the institutionalised structural arrangements that generate economic injury, cultural insult and exclusion of minoritised and marginalised groups from full parity of participation in education.

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