

## **The neoliberal politics of choice, student-led learning and educational inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Bronwyn E. Wood

Email: Bronwyn.wood@vuw.ac.nz

Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Education in Aotearoa New Zealand today has been powerfully shaped by the rise of neoliberal economic, political, and social agenda and is a long way from the ideals espoused by Beeby and Fraser in the 1950s and 60s. In New Zealand neoliberalism has taken a particular shape as a result of the *Tomorrow's Schools* policies since 1989. While schooling in New Zealand is still 'free' for most, the traits of neoliberalism have crept deeply into New Zealand education through the creation of rankings that lead to educational hierarchies and narratives of 'choice' that heighten this sense of competition between educational institutions (Connell, 2013). In addition, the reporting of assessment outcomes and performance (O'Neill, 2015; Thrupp, 2018) and the growth of private providers *within* New Zealand schools, even while the level of private schooling in New Zealand remains low (Thrupp et al., 2020) have contributed to a starkly divided school system. While authors like Macmaster (2013) and Larner and Le Heron (2005) have encouraged us to look at where neoliberal spaces have been resisted, moderated and at times directly undermined, we nonetheless remain in an education system that is deeply shaped by neoliberal discourses and practices in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

While neoliberalism has been relatively well-examined historically within New Zealand (Codd, 2005; Kelsey, 2015; Ladd & Fiske, 2003; McMaster, 2013; Olssen et al., 2004; Roberts, 2009), there has been little examination about how the newer discourses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner could indeed be strongly aligned to a neoliberal agenda. This is an important and critical question as upon first glance, the logic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner appears to embody the goals of progressive learning with its focus on student agency student-centred learning. However, what I will argue in this presentation is that neoliberalism has attached itself symbiotically to this narrative, thus undermining the potential for progressive goals for transformative learning that Beeby and Dewey would have hoped for (cf. Hirschman & Wood, 2018; Wood et al., 2021). In this paper I examine

the recent ideas conveyed by 21<sup>st</sup> century learners in New Zealand and analyse their potential for neoliberal enactments. In particular I look at the construction of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner through narratives of flexible, adaptable global economy workers, supported by the OECD and their knowledge economy work around the beginning of the millennium (OECD, 1996, 2005). I will examine how this discourse has presented strongly individualising narratives associated with personalised learning that encourage choice in education but leave us with thin notions of learning, education, and the shared collective understandings that matter for all. I will consider how technocratic solutions have been presented to educational problems through this narrative of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner that undermine the importance of deep knowledge, and overemphasize the value of efficient technological solutions to complex educational issues. Finally, I will argue that the discourses of globalisation and the global marketplace that underpin the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner narratives have disrupted the value and role of the teacher and served to maintain and even widen inequalities within New Zealand's education system.

Theoretically my paper is informed by Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism (Dewey & Bentley, 1949) which has been employed by Gert Biesta for a critique of contemporary educational contexts (Biesta, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015). Dewey's pragmatism offers an alternative to the current prevailing focus on 'learners', 'learning to learn' and on teachers as 'facilitators of learning' which has dominated the NZ curriculum scene in recent years through the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. Biesta (2010) refers to this as 'learnification' and argues that this overlooks the fact that "the purpose of education is that students learn *something*, that they learn for a *reason*, and they learn it from *someone*" (Biesta, 2015). Drawing from Dewey's *communication-centred* view of education, he argues that education is "neither about getting the curriculum into the child, nor about the child just doing anything, but about establishing a productive and meaningful connection between the two" (Biesta, 2014, p. 31). Applying this to an empirical study on inquiry-based learning with students in senior secondary schools, I will critically analyse whether their experiences enabled *productive connection* between teachers and students and the capacity for critical judgement and reflective action. I will conclude by considering whether Aotearoa New Zealand has any chance of remaining hopeful that the strong traits of progressive education and culturally responsive learning in the 'Scandinavia of the South Pacific' might out-weigh the logic and limitations of neoliberalism.

## References

- Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics and democracy*. NY: Routledge.
- Biesta, G. (2014). Pragmatising the curriculum: Bringing knowledge back into the curriculum conversation, but via pragmatism. *The Curriculum Journal*, 25(1), 29-49. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2013.874954>
- Biesta, G. (2015). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of Education*, 50(1), 75-87. doi:10.1111/ejed.12109
- Codd, J. (2005). Education policy and the challenges of globalisation: Commercialisation or citizenship? In J. Codd & K. Sullivan (Eds.), *Policy directions in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 3-16). Thomson Dunmore Press.
- Connell, R. (2013). The neoliberal cascade and education: An essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 99-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.776990>
- Dewey, J., & Bentley, A. (1949). *Knowledge and the known*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hirschman, K., & Wood, B. E. (2018, 2018-12-30). 21st Century Learners: Changing Conceptions of Knowledge, Learning and the Child. *The New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 20-35%V 23. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v23i0.5280>
- Kelsey, J. (2015). *The fire economy: New Zealand's reckoning*. Bridget Williams Books.
- Ladd, H. F., & Fiske, E. B. (2003). Does Competition Improve Teaching and Learning? Evidence from New Zealand. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737025001095>
- Larner, W., & Le Heron, R. (2005, November 1, 2005). Neo-liberalizing spaces and subjectivities: Reinventing New Zealand universities. *Organization*, 12(6), 843-862. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508405057473>
- McMaster, C. (2013). Working the 'Shady Spaces': Resisting Neoliberal Hegemony in New Zealand Education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 11(5), 523-531. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2013.11.5.523>
- O'Neill, A.-M. (2015, 2015/11/02). The New Zealand experiment: assessment-driven curriculum – managing standards, competition and performance to strengthen governmentality. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(6), 831-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1033766>
- [Record #220 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]
- [Record #158 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]
- Olssen, M., Codd, J., & O'Neill, A.-M. (2004). *Education policy: Globalization, citizenship and democracy*. Sage.
- Roberts, P. (2009). A new patriotism? Neoliberalism, citizenship and tertiary education in New Zealand. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(4), 410-423.

- Thrupp, M. (2018). *The Search for Better Educational Standards A Cautionary Tale* (1st ed. 2018. ed.). Springer International Publishing.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61959-0>
- Thrupp, M., O'Neill, J., Powell, D., & Butler, P. (2020). Private actors in New Zealand schooling: the path to saturation. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1726882>
- Wood, B. E., Thrupp, M., & Barker, M. (2021). Education policy. In G. Hassall & G. Karacaoglu (Eds.), *Social Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 272-285). Massey University Press.