

# If Beeby Were A Student Today: Beyond Reified Pedagogical Slogans To A Meaningful Educational Citizenship

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## ABSTRACT

Clarence Beeby's, Director of Education for the First Labour Government, aspirations for a "child-centred pedagogy" has drawn significant praise and criticism. Beeby's focus on the individual child's independence to learn in post-war New Zealand, upheld an educational progressivism argued to support a "right-of-citizenship" for an "educated democracy". Yet today, "child-" or "learner-centred" orientations are reified slogans in pedagogy and policy that have become synonymous with the neoliberal student. Neoliberalism has resulted in student performativity, where student engagement in the classroom or lecture hall demands certain emotional and behavioural performances, and education contributes to the development of market values. This paper considers whether Beeby's "child-centred" orientation provided autonomy to students, to sufficiently provide them a meaningful education citizenship in light of neoliberalism. It is concluded that Beeby's limited philosophical understanding of egalitarianism has arguably resulted in a focus on student performativity, rather than student rights. This paper then proposes that a focus on students' positive rights might reinvigorate the original intentions of Beeby, if students are viewed as critical agents.

**Keywords:** Clarence Beeby; child-centred; student-centred; student rights; New Zealand

*"The government's objective, broadly expressed, is that all persons, whatever their level of ability, 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. So far is this from being a pious platitude that the full acceptance of this principle will involve the orientation of the whole education system"*

**DR CLARENCE BEEBY, Director of Education**

## INTRODUCTION

Beeby's statement is hailed as the "visionary" post-war realisation of "education as a public good and the right to citizenship" in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system (Maharey, 2003). Dr Clarence Beeby, Director of Education for the First Labour Government, is hailed as the "architect of our modern education system" for his child-centred curriculum. Such was conceptualised as 'nurturing independence and making students into active, responsible participants in their own learning' (Lipson, 2020, p. 17). Beeby's policies are argued to have brought about 'equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealand citizens' (Renwick, 2023, par. 10), becoming an 'educational leitmotif elsewhere in the Western world' (Reinhart, 1988, par. 5).

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Today, “learner-” or “student-centred” educational labels are reified pedagogical and policy slogans. Such is considered the language of democratic participation in classroom discussions, group work or peer-based evaluation, quality assurance, and increasingly, educational governance:

Getting students to work in groups [...] is often designed as an efficient way of handling rising numbers of students in university classes [...] The language of graduate employability is another element of this pragmatic and largely instrumental agenda supporting active and group processes in student learning and assessment. The claimed benefits of student engagement include reductions in university drop-out rates, better examination results and learners who are better prepared for the labor market. Student engagement appears to be a no-brainer – a good idea all round, offering something on which both educational theorists and policy makers can agree (Macfarlane, 2017, p. 8)

Despite reification, New Zealand’s education system is inherently unequal. In 2018, it ranked 33rd out of 38 countries on the OECD’s Pisa scorecard (Walters, 2022). High decile schools still contribute the majority of students who obtain University Entrance, while Māori and Pasifika students remain at lower achievement rates. Student debt has ballooned to \$16 billion (NZD), with 66 percent of students struggling to pay for food, clothes or bills (Madden-Smith, 2022).

This paper provides a short contemplation on whether Beeby’s orientation provided autonomy to students, or ‘an illusion of [equalising] farsightedness’ (Couch, 2017, p. 100). It first addresses how the Beeby/Fraser reforms did not result in meaningful educational citizenship for students, with learner-centred pedagogies reinforcing neoliberalism. This is argued to be due to Beeby’s child-centred reforms have resulted in student performativity rather than a focus on students’ rights and citizenship, due to a ‘relatively limited understanding of egalitarianism’ (Couch, 2017, p. 13).

## **BEEBYISM: EDUCATED DEMOCRACY VIA CHILD-CENTRISM?**

Beeby’s work has had a profound influence on the education system in Aotearoa New Zealand. He was appointed as the first Director of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research in 1939. He became the Director of Education (Head of the Ministry of Education) during the First Labour Government, when Peter Fraser was Minister for Education. Beeby continued to focus on education in development contexts with his appointment as Assistant Director-General of UNESCO in 1948, and later role as New Zealand’s Ambassador to France.

The explosion of 1920s child psychology and a 1930s “internationalist and anti-war sentiment” arguably contributed to Beeby’s educational progressivism (Beeby, 1992; Couch, 2017). This progressivism sought a focus on the individual student’s scholastic achievements for egalitarian purposes:

The aim of modern education is to create people who are not only self-disciplined and free in spirit, gifted in work and in enjoyment, worthy and desirable as persons, but also responsible and generous in social life, able to give and to take freely from others, sensitive to social needs, willing to serve social ends and to lose themselves in social purposes greater than themselves (Isaacs, 1938, p. 83)

This orientation was not only reflected in Beeby and Fraser’s nation-wide reforms to school boards, vocational curriculum, and qualification access to tertiary education. It also proposed that child-centred pedagogies of “choosing time”, “activity methods”, and a focus on teaching for student understanding, could contribute towards an “educated democracy” based on a “right-of-citizenship” (Couch, 2017; McDonald, 2002). Yet by the 1960s-80s, these reforms lost popularity. Child-centred models were labelled “Beebyism” or “playway” by critics who claimed rote learning could not be replaced by social promotion or liberalised curricula.

## THE GREAT UNDOING: RISE OF THE NEOLIBERAL STUDENT

If Beeby were a student today, he would probably be shocked to find that rote learning is no longer the prevalent critique. Instead the argument is that the “child-” or “student-centred” model has become a slogan for the marketisation of education. Bauman (1998) identifies that contemporary democracy has become synonymous with capitalism and consumption with democratic participation, resulting in an equity that focuses on consumer choice. It is argued by Tabulawa (2003), that learner-centred pedagogies backed by the World Bank, OECD, and World Trade Organization, have since moved to a one-size-fits-all educational approach. Tabulawa suggests this is because market-based democracy focuses on a radical individualism and personal responsibility, which reshapes learner-centred pedagogies from the right-of-citizenship to market predispositions.

Macfarlane (2017) identifies such predispositions when examining *student participative performativity*. Student performativity is the “mirror” of *teacher performativity*, where targets and evaluation now determine the quality of a teacher or academic performance, in course evaluation or research (Ball, 2003). Macfarlane likens performativity to Jackson’s (1968) “hidden curriculum”, that proposed schools condition students towards certain dispositions and behaviours through time management, organisation, and power dynamics with educators. Student performativity is then seen as

performative demands typically includ[ing] attending classes punctually, taking part in classroom discussions in order to convey an impression of enthusiasm and commitment, participating in group work and peer evaluation exercises, posting comments to online learning forums, and displaying or espousing the ‘right’ attitudes, such as being committed to ‘global citizenship’.... Those students who do not comply with the performative regime are castigated, and negatively labeled as ‘social loafers’ or online ‘lurkers’ (Macfarlane, 2017, p. 4-5).

Macfarlane argues that “student-centredness” has been subverted to neoliberalised student engagement policies, distorting student autonomy to ‘organizational objectives that are focused on efficiency and effectiveness to meet government-funded performance targets’ (p. 115).

Crouch (2017) criticises that Beeby’s reforms were not opposed to this type of neoliberalisation for two key reasons. Firstly, Couch views Beeby’s reforms as largely “utilitarian” because his “child-centred” approach focused directly on the *instruments of education* - curriculum, assessment systems and qualifications - *rather than on students themselves*. Secondly, he argues that the famous Beeby/Fraser statement was not specific when defining equity for students, making it ‘broad enough for diverse liberal and conservative reforms to appeal to it as a justification for their purposes’ (Couch, 2017, p. 100). Such is exemplified in Steve Maharey’s (2003) speech where he claimed that the Helen Clark Labour Government was aligned with Beeby’s vision in ‘the state [committing] to enabl[e] every child, each citizen, to reach their potential’ (par. 4). The reforms during this period were argued by Thrupp (2017) to not undo the decades of successive neoliberalisation by both National and Labour Governments, but to instead ‘take some of the rough edges off it: producing “neoliberalism with a social conscience”’ (p. 5).

## EGALITARIAN DREAMS: NOSTALGIA, CITIZENSHIP AND STUDENT RIGHTS

It is often suggested that the successive neoliberal-driven reforms of the 1980s onwards sought to abolish Beeby’s vision for an egalitarian society. Professor Peter O’Connor, Director of the Centre for Arts and Social Transformation at the University of Auckland, laments this:

Beeby understood that democracy was made with your hands; you created the critical citizen with your hands. People with agency who could make things. We’ve lost that. We threw it away. (Amery, 2020, par. 19)

Couch (2017) views this as nostalgia, as it ‘appears to conflat the Beebian myth of equality of opportunity’ with an ‘underlying egalitarian sentiment that accompanied the educational reforms—that is, seeing the persistence of the

former as evidence of the latter' (p. 201). Oxley (1974) instead proposes even prior to the First Labour Government, "equal opportunities" as a subtype of an egalitarian ideology was 'potentially compatible with an inequality not ascribed at birth' (p. 45).

Couch attributes this to Beeby's weak understanding of egalitarianism in New Zealand. Education during the Crown and Provincial periods were inherently Anglifying and employed a user-pays system prior to the state universalisation of education in 1877, and the later move to the welfare state. While the latter appeared to crystallise egalitarianism, sociological micro-studies noted that mid-nineteenth century social-class inequalities 'gave way to less egalitarianism and less occupational mobility' (Nolan, 2007, p. 121). With the return of the user-pays system in the 1990s, egalitarian rhetoric could no longer assure the neutrality of schooling during a fiscal crisis, revealing inherent ethnic and gender-based inequalities.

Conceptualising the state as undermining child-centred Beebyism not only serves to conceal Beeby's limited understanding of egalitarianism, but also fails to perceive the student encounter of education then and today. An agricultural student in Otago in 1883 stated that 'so short is the period during which the students can meet freely together, that anything in the shape of [a] liberal exchange of thoughts [... is] almost unknown' (Elsworthy, 1990, p. 13). Today, the relation of "learner-centred pedagogies" to the "student as consumer" model means 'scholarship and [student] activism for structural equality, political inclusion, economic access, and human rights has given way to an emphasis on multicultural niches' (Darder, 2012, p. 412). In other words, "learner-centred" policies have become an umbrella term for student performativity through access and provision of services, rather than through student rights.

Student rights such as the right to participate in the free exchange of ideas, are supportive of a positive agenda to help students develop, realise and actualise their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2003). Macfarlane (2012) argues such a positive agenda endorses an action-oriented pedagogy, necessitating a focus on students as active citizens. He does not argue the avoidance of "child-" or "student-centred" learning, rather he proposes that it is essential to include the civic dimension of education. He claims that without the pursuit of students' "inner autonomy" for Beeby's "child-centred" learning, an "educated democracy" cannot be achieved. Instead it is reduced to the panopticon: where reified slogans conceal that students 'are no longer trusted to learn without being *seen* to be learning' (Macfarlane, 2016, par. 6).

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, there was an intentionality in the Beeby/Fraser statement to prioritise the 'right-of-citizenship' for an "educated democracy" in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is articulated by Fraser when he stated: 'Education is not enough if it teaches us merely to make a living. Education must teach us how to live.' (Massey, 1968, p. 44). The core inquiry of this paper is whether Beeby's conceptualisation of "child-" or "student-centred" learning was *strong* enough to provide autonomy *to* students.

The reification of terms "child-" or "learner-centred pedagogies", are argued to be value-laden concepts that naturally adapt to neoliberalisation because of their progressive nature (Tabulawa, 2003). The liberal humanist tradition for child-centred practices from the likes of Dewey to today, upholds the importance of education developing collective worldviews and models of citizenship. Such is amenable with neoliberalism where democratic governance is considered synonymous with capitalism. Due to the neoliberal educational reforms of the 1980s, Beeby's limited philosophical understanding of egalitarianism then becomes evident, as his original purpose was lost (Couch, 2017).

The result is that "student voice" became 'the clarion call of political correctness' (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 729). Today, under the label of "student-centred" learning, students participate in the performance of internal monitoring of quality assessment, evaluation, and educational reviews. Student engagement policies now demand certain performances in the classroom, emotionally and behaviourally. This has not supported equality in New Zealand's education system, with a 2022 OECD report highlighting the need for increased equity funding in disadvantaged schools (NZEI, 2022).

The question is: how can we provide a "student-centred pedagogy" without reducing student autonomy to performativity? Macfarlane (2012) argues this orientation focuses on students' positive rights or their *freedom to*, to

support their autonomy and needs. He gives the example of students who are *free to* engage in student-led forms of assessment or democratic conversations, rather than focus on attendance requirements that reflect the institution's self-evaluation processes. Giroux articulates this as

educat[ing] students how to be critical agents, to learn how to take risks, engage in thoughtful dialogue, and take on the issues of what it means to be socially responsible (Peters, 2012, p. 694)

There is a semblance of Beeby here, without slogans or performance. Student autonomy is then proposed to appear when we ponder: what if the Beeby/Fraser statement did not say that all students have a *right to a free education*, but a *right to an education that is inherently free[ing]*?

## **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

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