



**Title of Issue/section** Teachers and Curriculum, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2017

**Editor/s** Kerry Earl and Carrie Swanson

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**To cite this article:** O'Neill, J. (2017). Marketplace or commodity progressivism and state schooling. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 17(1), 7–10.

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v17i1.170>

**To link to this volume** <http://tandc.ac.nz/tandc/issue/view/41>

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## MARKETPLACE OR COMMODITY PROGRESSIVISM AND STATE SCHOOLING

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To what extent do our politicians actually care about state schooling? On the surface the current National-led government's widely-publicised Better Public Services (BPS) targets, with their accompanying rhetoric of priority or underserved learners and National Standards crusades, appear to be evidence of an unwavering commitment to maintaining a high quality public or state schooling system. Nonetheless, without wishing to be melodramatic, since 2008 the current National-led government has quietly discarded the long-standing social contract obligation of every government in New Zealand to assure world-class schooling for all. Under this social contract, a public or state schooling system had been, to all intents and purposes, free at the point of use and available on an equal basis, irrespective of the ability to pay.

The National-led government has also explicitly limited its future obligations. It has coined the term 'partial subsidy' to describe its Vote Education contributions towards the overall cost of state schooling provision. At the same time, it has paradoxically asserted that it is 'inequitable' for government to provide differentiated student subsidies to families choosing public and private schools. So on the one hand we have government using the language of targets and standards to better meet the schooling needs of all students, but on the other hand, we have government setting limits on what it is prepared to fund and what it is prepared to provide through the state system, and even what now counts as part of the state system. Under the current government, for example, we have seen the establishment of publicly funded, privately owned Partnership Schools Kura Hourua, the state integration of former private schools that continue to levy compulsory annual attendance dues of several thousand dollars per child, and increased state subsidies towards the costs of attending a private school. These kinds of gradual adjustments to public policy settings are sometimes referred to as 'privatisation by stealth'.

In setting limits and turning a blind eye to growing shortages and gaps in provision, government has effectively 'externalised' the responsibility for funding and providing important dimensions of state schooling. Externalisation is a term used by economists to describe the act of passing on to a third party, or not fully pricing, some or all of the costs of providing a service. To give just one example from our daily lives: the long-term degradation of publicly owned aquifers and waterways resulting directly from the intensification and corporatisation of privately owned farmland. In state schooling, government has for its part externalised responsibility for generating sufficient revenue to meet BPS targets to schools (international education and grant seeking), parents (fees and donations), the private sector (contracting out and Public Private Partnerships—PPPs), and philanthropy (charitable giving and social investment).

Under the National-led government, passing on the costs and the responsibilities of state schooling has become the new normal. In the process, government has neatly refashioned and commercialised the twentieth century social democratic project to reduce educational inequalities through universal public services provision. In order to facilitate a twenty-first century approach to targeted social investment by government, it is claimed to be essential to further deregulate the schooling marketplace and open it up to successful businesses, NGOs and philanthropic social entrepreneurs. If more of society's 'winners' become involved with state schooling, so the argument goes, society as a whole will 'win'. These new policy entrepreneurs are consequently portrayed as civic heroes for being able to find creative private sector solutions to the so-called problem of a monolithic public schooling system that underserves the needs of its students.

The American writer Andi Zeisler has recently coined the term 'marketplace feminism' to describe the shift from mainstream social or liberal democratic feminism (the project to change the inherently unfair social structures and norms of a patriarchal society) to a commodity feminism that reinforces neoliberal ideals and seeks their embodiment through consumer desires and behaviours. This is

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ISSN: 2382-0349

Pages. 7–10

feminism as brand, feminism as an entrepreneurial, self- and wealth-making project of individual choice and personal responsibility. The same, I suggest, may now be observed of education progressivism.

Progressivism in schooling is essentially about social justice: emphasising holistic personal and social development, and preparation of children for active citizenship, prioritising the educational needs of the least advantaged, and mediating the structural effects and consequences of capitalism through government provision of schooling that expands access and opportunity. The standard social democratic narrative of state schooling as a consensual, whole-of-society commitment to reduce educational inequalities across the system as a whole, for the collective wellbeing of all, has been displaced by marketplace or commodity progressivism. Reducing educational inequalities and 'fixing up' the state schooling system is now being sold to us as the socially responsible, social investment or venture philanthropy work of civic-minded corporates, business-like charitable trusts and charismatic individual edu-preneurs. This is about the ideological and political work of persuading people to view the ideal state as backstop, safety net or ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.

To be clear, marketplace or commodity progressivism in schooling is appealing on one level. Undoubtedly, philanthropic investment in schooling has some potential to provide 'proof of concept' in challenging public policy areas where government has demonstrated no apparent interest or commitment to provide the funding necessary to seed genuine innovation in schooling. Yet the successes, for all the satisfaction they bring to participating students, whānau and local communities, are little more than the schooling inequality equivalent of clickbait journalism. They secure our attention, admiration and approval in the short term, but do nothing to address the long-term structural educational, economic and social inequalities that only a progressive, integrated, multi-agency, system-wide approach to state schooling can hope to mediate. Nor can these new private sector solutions compensate for chronic underfunding of state schools by government. The private sector tends to invest its own funding in state schools only for the duration of a project, not for a generation or generations of schoolchildren. When the project grant or funding dries up, or the social entrepreneurship spotlight moves to the next 'big idea', families, schools, teachers and state services are inevitably left to pick up the pieces.

Marketplace or commodity progressivism in schooling reinforces and is reinforced by neoliberalism. By virtue of its very nature and origins, marketplace or commodity progressivism in education cannot question its own inherent contradiction: Why on earth should we look to those who have personally benefited from the ideological shift to market liberalism over the last four decades (and the collective harm of growing inequalities market liberalism inevitably produces) to address the consequential social challenges that state schools are expected to solve, now and in the future?

By law our state school system is universal and free. This statutory entitlement and cultural norm have been in place since the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War. During the few decades in which there existed a broadly non-partisan progressive sentiment towards state schooling (roughly from the late 1930s to the late 1970s), it was generally accepted that state schooling was a public good, that the role of the state was to fund and provide schools, and that irrespective of personal and family circumstances all children were entitled to receive the schooling experiences they needed in order to improve their life chances. The state schooling system actually built by Peter Fraser and C. E. Beeby was imperfect and unacceptably classed, gendered and racist by today's standards. Nevertheless, it offered the best prospect available for the practical realisation of society's moral aspiration to a more equitable society, and its collective determination to ensure that children could enjoy greater social mobility and better living standards than their parents' generation.

A progressive school system was made possible by virtue of a progressive wealth (income and asset) taxation system, which aimed to redistribute from those who had more than enough to those who had less than they needed. Income and asset inequality in New Zealand reduced between the 1940s and the 1980s. A full, rich schooling experience was regarded as a basic right of citizenship, and its provision a basic obligation of the state. There existed an explicit social contract between the state and civil society. The role of the state was to provide high quality schooling for all and to adjust its fiscal policy settings to achieve that end. The state could therefore plan to ensure that all schools had adequate buildings, staffing, services and resources, even if the price of this was a cumbersome central bureaucracy. Irrespective of background and need, all children could access an equitable

experience at school. Irrespective of background and wealth, and single-sex or single-faith considerations aside, the great majority of families would send their children to the local school and student populations were therefore broadly representative of their local community. Good quality public schooling effectively resulted from a welfarist commitment to public services provision by the state. It was fully funded through fiscal policy supplemented by the modest sweat equity of parents (working bees and cake stalls).

None of us who are parents or workers in the state schooling system would argue that it cannot be improved, but the causes of educational inequalities are varied and, statistically, very few of these—and certainly not the most influential overall—can be sheeted home to decisions and professional judgments made by teachers and schools. Against most of the financial investment indicators used to compare our state schools with those in other similar advanced economies, teachers, students and schools overall in New Zealand are under-resourced for the educational work they are required to do by central government (including risk, audit and compliance). To compound the complexities of the challenge of reducing inequalities of schooling outcome, according to the 2016 Child Poverty Monitor, in their daily lives outside school 240,000 or 22 percent of Kiwi children live in material hardship, 295,000 or 28 percent live in income poor households, and 90,000 or 8 percent of children live both in low income households and in material hardship.

Key school choice, curriculum, assessment and achievement policy changes introduced since 2008 by the current government, and the market funding mechanisms used to deliver these, can only be driven by neoliberal ideology and political horse-trading. This is because many of the new government policy settings quite simply fly in the face of reputable evidence from overseas of the harms they have been shown to cause, particularly to already disadvantaged children's learning, in other schooling systems. Market- or commodity-based approaches to reducing educational inequalities will change none of these problematic policy settings, although they undoubtedly provide good news stories for government and their partner edu-preneurs.

On the one hand, maybe this commentary is just the frustrated, paranoid rant of a tired, salt and pepper haired, working class baby boomer who has seen the social mobility ladders he benefited greatly from, and which used to be available without question to all through state schooling, labelled unaffordable and made gradually unavailable to his children throughout his adult life (of my 43 years as a registered voter, only 15 have been under a centre-left government).

On the other hand, if we pause to look closely enough, under the current government's watch we can clearly see the popular cultural fetishisation of these supposedly heroic, civic minded edu-preneurs, and the active encouragement of their 'can do-must do' voices and narratives in state schooling policy conception, development and implementation. Among the most prominent of these are Public Infrastructure Partners (Hobsonville Point and Phase II PPP new school builds), Sanitarium and Fonterra, CORE Education, Cognition Education, Kidscan, Foundation North, NEXT Foundation, COMET, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, Catherine Isaac (Kura Hourua Authorisation Board), Frances Valentine (Mindlab at Unitec) Pat Snedden (Manaiakalani Trust and Manaiakalani Outreach), and John Hattie (Visible Learning Plus and Visible Classroom). Prior to 2008 few of these had a major profile, role or voice in shaping New Zealand schooling policy nationally or regionally. In 2017 most or all do, directly and indirectly, and make a very good living from their efforts, both financially<sup>i</sup> and in terms of their professional influence as part of a burgeoning 'global network governance' of state school reformers, as the English researcher Stephen Ball describes it.

In this context a reasonable question to be asked concerns the extent to which these forms of individual and socially networked edu-preneurship serve the broader social good, serve the democratic self-governance expectations of local communities across the state schooling system and, above all, advance the best interests of those children whose life chances absolutely must be improved through universally available, free, high quality schooling and other essential public services.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, in the 2015–2016 financial year Manaiakalani Education Trust made third party consultancy fee payments totaling \$165,000 to Pat Snedden, its Executive Chair; and in the 2014–2015 financial year, Cognition Education made third party payments totaling \$223,000 to John Hattie, then one of its directors. Significant third party payments have been made to both individuals for several years according to the annual returns held on the Charities register.

**Find out more**

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