Charter Schools or Progressive Education? Lessons from Finland

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Abstract
New Zealand’s current government has embarked on a course of supporting private providers of education in the form of “partnership” schools with the claim that these charter schools can address the recalcitrant problem of disparity of achievement between students from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. This paper examines evidence from the research on charter schools and argues that attention should rather be paid to the Finnish example of high and equal educational achievement and to the landmark achievements of New Zealand’s own pioneers of progressive education as we prepare a new generation for the twenty-first century.

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Finland is one of the few countries that have consistently outperformed New Zealand since introducing a number of measures aimed at increasing equality of achievement and universal excellence (Ministry of Education 2008; Telford 2010). The reforms introduced in Finland between the 1960s and 90s bear a remarkable resemblance to those of the progressive education movement in New Zealand in the 1930s and 40s which gained the New Zealand education system worldwide acclaim.

However a number of recent government policies have been criticised as undermining New Zealand’s unique success in education. These include league tables rating schools against each other and funding cuts in an atmosphere that Carol Mutch refers to as “high accountability, low trust, economically driven, top-down change” (Mutch 2012). Higher education has also suffered from reduced funding in what is described as a “punitive performance management environment” with a concomitant fall in New Zealand universities’ world rankings (Theunissen 2013; Grey 2013).

The National Party minority government has also passed legislation to fund private sector entrepreneurs in the form of “partnership” or charter schools (Trevett 2012b; Davison 2013). This use of education funds was advised against by Treasury and the Ministry of Education and was also opposed by a majority of New Zealanders polled in a New Zealand Herald DigiPoll. The Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) demanded that “the $19 million set aside for charter schools be returned to the state school sector to fund programmes that raise achievement for at-risk students” and stated that they “will continue to fight for the abolition of the charter school legislation” (Otago Daily Times 2013; PPTA 2013). The main parties in opposition, Labour and the Greens also committed to repeal of the legislation (Shearer 2013; Green Party 2013).

Following rallies and marches by thousands of teachers and parents against the government’s proposals New Zealand Educational Institute president Judith Nowotarski said

> We need the Government to understand that New Zealanders don’t want to follow failed policies from overseas – policies such as charter schools, competition versus collaboration between schools and teachers, league tables, National Standards and winner and loser schools (NZEI 2013).
Assessment of New Zealand Education

Although New Zealand spends considerably less per student than the great majority of OECD nations, most New Zealand school students have regularly ranked very highly by international standards. In the 2012 survey of the 34 OECD countries, New Zealand ranked fourth in reading and scientific literacy and seventh in mathematical literacy (NZ Teachers Council 2012).

The 2011 OECD report on evaluation and assessment in New Zealand schools praised the local approach which rejected the ranking of schools by test results. The OECD review team was most impressed by the high degree of trust in New Zealand placed on the capability of the schools, teachers, and students to engage in self-evaluation and improvement. The review team commended the New Zealand approach of attention to international developments while not blindly following the global trend towards high-stakes accountability. They recognised that, “especially in primary education, there is a general consensus against national testing and the use of test results for school rankings” (Laveault et al. 2012; Nusche 2012).

Problems of Unequal Achievement

Considering the long-standing recognition of New Zealand’s education system as world-class and above the OECD average (Statistics New Zealand 2005), New Zealanders may be perplexed by the government’s determination to initiate such wide-ranging changes. According to the Minister of Education, the government is driven by concern that, while average figures for New Zealand’s educational achievement are very good, the disparity between rich and poor and between Māori and Pasifika and others is wide.

New Zealand is said to have the second highest rate of educational inequality in the OECD, with Māori, Pacific, and students from low-income backgrounds showing the highest rates of educational under-achievement. Statistics show that one in five New Zealand students leave secondary school with no qualifications; for Pacific students, it is one in four, and for Māori, one in three (Barback 2012).

This now worsening situation has long concerned New Zealand educationalists and policymakers (Francis 2013; Snook and O’Neill 2010). But are charter schools the answer to the problems of unequal achievement ascribed to public schools?
This claim has been made by the New Zealand Business Roundtable and its associated Education Forum and New Zealand Initiative and by organizations such as the Koch brothers’ Cato Institute and the Heartland Institute in the United States (Barkan 2011; Ravitch 2010; Lipman 2013; Harrison 2004; 2005; LaRocque 2004; Mallard 2005; Kerr 2006). In addition, Julian Robertson, US Hedge Fund billionaire and New Zealand resident, has funded scholarships at the University of Auckland and financed the Aotearoa Foundation as the New Zealand arm of his Robertson Foundation to promote charter schools in New Zealand (Quality Public Education Coalition 2012; The University of Auckland 2013; Education Aotearoa 2013). Their claim is that competition from private schools will improve education for disadvantaged students.

**Research on Charter Schools**

However, although conservative groups loudly proclaim the failure of public schools (Molland 2013; Sirota 2013), evidence from rigorous research points to students achieving less well in charter schools than could be expected in public schools (Bulkley 2011; Carnoy et al. 2005).

In one example researchers from the University of Connecticut and Duke University designed a study which followed three cohorts of North Carolina students (approximately 100,000 pupils) from third grade to eighth grade (equivalent to New Zealand years 4 and 9) and observed 8,745 charter school students in that state. They reported that “the negative effects of attending a charter school are large” (Bifulco and Ladd 2006).

*Charter schools increase inequality of achievement*

Sweden’s experiment with charter schools has seen a decline in Sweden’s scores on international tests such as PISA (Bohlmark and Lindahl 2012) while research by the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies in the UK warned that

> [the introduction of charter schools in Sweden] increased inequality of achievement as well as social segregation in Sweden - a country with a universal welfare state and a relatively high level of social equality - then other countries could risk an even greater increase in inequality … (Wiborg 2010).

Evidence of Charter schools’ contribution to increased segregation in terms of ethnicity, class and academic achievement has also come from research in Chile and the Netherlands (Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs 2010; Elacqua 2012). Such increases in inequality, notably very high in recent
years in New Zealand, have contributed to a lowering of health and well-being indicators as well as economic stagnation in countries such as the USA and Canada (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Herman 2013).

**The progressive educational reform movement in New Zealand**

Where policy makers use resources to improve education, especially in the early years, and increase equality of opportunity, as they have done in Finland, teachers and others are given confidence to be more creative and innovative (Rashbrooke 2013). The concept of human development founded on the belief that “economic prosperity must rest upon and promote human welfare” guided those who introduced progressive education to New Zealand in the 1930s and 40s (Smith and Warden 2010; Benadé 2011; Dalziel et al. 2009).

Debates over the philosophies of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori had raged in educational circles from the turn of the century so that New Zealanders developed an independent attitude toward traditional English and German conceptions of education and schooling, establishing a system of universal education focused on the interests and needs of the developing child. This approach meant rethinking received models of schooling and orienting the system toward educational equality and the concept of the development of “the personality of each child.” These ideas were adopted within the New Zealand Labour Party and gained impetus from the 1937 conference of the New Zealand Education Fellowship (NEF) (Mutch 2001; Sewell and Bethell 2009; Abbiss 1998).

Peter Fraser, as prime minister of New Zealand’s first Labour government, and C.E. Beeby as director of education implemented a vision of education that included broad equality of schooling and equality of opportunity to all throughout the nation. Beeby’s internationally known *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries* gave his fellow educationalists arguments to advocate for “higher levels of national commitment to the professional education of primary teachers and supporting services” (Renwick 1998). The Labour government’s policies resonated with the Scottish tradition in education with its emphasis on universalism, inclusion, equality and social justice which had considerable influence in New Zealand where the first university, established in the predominantly Scottish southern city of Dunedin, embodied the belief in the “vital importance of education for all” (Dobbins 2009; Phillips and Hearn 2008; Riddell 2009).
Innovative curriculum development

C.E. Beeby and A.E. Campbell, director of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research encouraged pedagogical initiative within an overall curriculum framework. Frank Milner concluded from a curriculum survey he conducted in 1936 that the curriculum should embrace a “liberal synthesis [of the] humanistic and the practical.” J. E. Strachan as principal of Rangiora High School developed the first student self-governing School Council (Couling 2005; Grant 2003) and Leonard John Wild, who initiated a highly acclaimed programme of liberal and scientific education aimed at aspiring agriculturalists, was inspired by Strachan to introduce a School Council at Fielding High School (Renwick 2012).

New Zealand’s first Education professor, James Shelley, lecturers Dorothy Baster and Olive Grenfell and teachers such as Gwen Somerset, Doreen Dolton, Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton, Sylvia Ashton-Warner and those of the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association including principal Enid Wilson participated in incorporating the ideals of progressivism into the world-leading New Zealand education system prevailing from the 1940s to 1980s. They were joined by nearly “six thousand teachers registered for lectures or seminars and approximately twenty thousand people [who] took part in [the 1937 NEF] conference related activities” (Middleton 2006; Sewell and Bethell 2009; Abbiss 1998; May 2013; Dowden 2007).

New Zealand was fertile ground for the ideas of the NEF which promoted American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s child-centred educational philosophy (Couch 2012). Many teachers had already enthusiastically integrated progressive educational principles into their teaching. An egalitarian and collegial ethos mediated the adoption of these ideas by teachers, officials, and governments for half a century following the election of the first Labour Government in 1935 and the NEF conference (Abbiss 1998; Couch 2012; Gordon 1999).

In Democracy and Education Dewey argued that education needs to encourage our natural motivation to learn and gain mastery over our subject matter rather than concentrate on training for specific vocational tasks that may disappear with the rapidly changing industrial landscape. However Dewey’s arguments also had a political edge which no doubt added to their appeal in a post depression world faced with insurgent Nazism. He maintained that
It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them. Wherever social control means subordination of individual activities to class authority, there is danger that industrial education will be dominated by acceptance of the status quo (Dewey 1916 Chapter 9).

**Modifying practice to the needs of students**

Progressive educationalists in New Zealand also placed a similar emphasis on socio-economic and civic inclusion, multiculturalism and the development of the “whole child” as do their counterparts in Finland today (Openshaw in Rata and Openshaw 2006; Jacobs and Rea 2007; Weldon 2006; Barclay 2005; Abbiss 1998; Baumer, Ferholt, and Lecusay 2005). These approaches are of particular benefit to students who are struggling as it allows teachers to modify their practice to suit their needs. A prescriptive stage-focussed curricular programme with testing to pre-determined National Standards can only hamper the tailoring of teaching to particular needs (Ministry of Education 2011; Vaughn and Schumm 1994; Morgan 2009; Gallagher, Hipkins, and Zohar 2012).

**Primacy of educational aims**

The New Zealand adoption of progressive education ideas took place through practical experimentation and on-the-ground evaluation of what worked in New Zealand. Similarly, the Finns have studied initiatives and systems around the world but have incorporated only those concepts which could be adapted to achieve their aims in the Finnish setting (Sahlberg and Hargreaves 2011).

By recognizing that education could not assist in achieving their political and economic goals unless they respected the primacy of educational aims the Finns were able to achieve their “miracle” turnaround in both education and economy from mediocre to stellar (Sahlberg 2010). With this fundamental understanding, a long-term commitment to the equitable distribution of resources and authority and to the education of specialist teachers to assist students at risk of under-achieving was underwritten by successive governments (Hogan 1988).

New Zealand policy makers, as Massey University’s Professor Snook explains should look to Finland, where teaching is the most favoured profession …Teachers are well educated: a minimum of a five-year masters degree, in which they acquire in-depth knowledge of their teaching fields and social and global awareness … teachers are
autonomous (no lesson plans, principal supervision or ERO-type inspections). No school results are published and schools are not ranked. All schools are well funded. Not surprisingly, Finland regularly heads OECD studies in educational achievement in all subjects and the gap between the highest and the lowest performing schools is the smallest in the world (Snook 2009).

**Finnish Lessons**

Finland’s reforms included decentralization of support resources, increasing support for lower achieving students, raising the level of teacher education, and giving more autonomy to teachers in terms of curriculum interpretation and assessment. This “Finnish miracle” took as long to establish as New Zealand’s comparable education system, but thirty years later.

Apart from high levels of literacy Finland in the 1970s had mediocre educational statistics but today Finland has very low variation in student achievement between schools, exceptional results in terms of participation in education at all levels and levels of learning in mathematics, reading literacy, natural sciences and problem-solving (Sahlberg 2007, 158ff.). The near equality of achievement across schools is even more encouraging considering the recent relatively high rates of migration to Finland from a wide variety of countries (Dervin et al. 2012; Sahlberg 2007; Talib et al. 2009). Unfortunately the Finnish educational system does not appear to have been considered as an exemplar by New Zealand policy makers (Hancock 2011; Moore 2013; Partanen 2011).

Pasi Sahlberg sees an alignment between the improvement of the Finnish education system and the push toward a ‘knowledge society’ in Finland’s economy. However he makes it clear that education must proceed according to its own norms and cannot successfully borrow concepts from business management. While the general need to encourage innovative practices and to prepare for a largely unpredictable future are recognized by leaders and professionals throughout the country the increasingly high regard for education means that government support at all levels, from providing learning materials to maintaining buildings, allows teachers, principals, parents and students to concentrate on learning, preparing for, and participating in the knowledge society (Sahlberg and Hargreaves 2011).

Finland has, along with top educational nations Korea and Singapore, focused on ensuring that all schools have sufficient funding to provide equal opportunity for students. Teacher preparation
to a high standard in disciplinary and pedagogical university courses as well as teaching internships are complemented by an ongoing professional learning program, elimination of tracking and an emphasis on inculcating higher order skills in the classroom (Darling-Hammond 2010; Grubb 2007).

**Decentralisation and more regulation**

In the 1980’s New Zealand’s Lange government followed the managerial market model of supermarket magnate Brian Picot’s “Task Force” in doing away with regional support centres and placing administrative burdens on local school boards while centralising control over curriculum (Sullivan 1992). Finland moved in the opposite direction to decentralise decision making on matters of curriculum, effectively introducing the system that New Zealand had carefully built since the 1940s to encourage innovation and experimentation by experienced and committed professionals.

New Zealand policy makers have recently moved even further away from the successful model pioneered by New Zealand’s progressive educationalists so that in today’s schools the professionals are micro-managed with the National Education Guidelines (NEGs) and National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) including performance management systems (PMS) (NAG 2 & 3), The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) which publishes the academic performance for each school in National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) results, and Education Review Office (ERO) audits (Malik, Davey, and Kelly 2011).

In the teaching of mathematics, for example, Barton, Clark and Sheryn argue that this organisational load and assessment regime combine with an overloaded curriculum to “squeeze the time and energy available to teachers for focussing on wider mathematical developments” (Barton, Clark, and Sheryn 2010). This system of surveillance and supervision treats teachers “not as professionals but as skilled technicians” largely excluding them from curriculum development (Snook 2005).

Nonetheless, although New Zealand education has been subject to many of the forces that Finnish education has managed to avoid, the resilience of the education system in New Zealand is remarkable. This resilience owes much to the strongly held beliefs in fairness, inclusion and equity which are established in many educational institutions and organisations as well as
throughout the wider society (Dobbins 2009; Fischer 2012). Arguably these values are to a considerable degree attributable to our progressive heritage in education.

Alongside the strictures of the older citizenship ethic - obedience, loyalty and duty - were set the new imperatives of the liberal-progressive one - human brotherhood, international understanding, respect for other cultures (Archer and Openshaw, 1992 quoted in Mutch 2002).

Conclusions

During the 20th century the democratic ideal of “equality of opportunity” was considered a primary purpose of public education (Hochschild and Scovronick 2004; Peters 2001; Strauss 1992). Another has been the education of citizens so that they may “assume the responsibility of self-governance” (Dewey 1903; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad 2004).

Education can only serve such democratic purposes if it is authentic, coherent and integral with the inherent nature of learning “to inquire and create” and the full development of the intrinsic capacities of individuals as participants in society (Fukuda-Parr 2003; Hogan 1988; Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006; Humboldt quoted in Chomsky 1971; Veatch 1974). However a market-led agenda imposing competitive and obtrusive testing regimes on students and between schools is inimical to learning and may ultimately destroy the value of education for the purposes desired (Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Fiske and Ladd 2000).

Following the Picot Report in the 1980s a course has been followed from “user pays” and “least cost provision” toward privatisation in education along with the shifting of responsibility for provision from the state to the “consumer” (Gordon 1999; Dobbins 2009; Lauder and Wylie 1990; Schwartz 1994).

NZ has requested other countries to open up their entire education sectors to foreign competition, while allowing foreign private education providers to operate in NZ without restrictions (Dobbins 2009).

This paper has argued that, learning from the Finnish example, New Zealand policy makers need to avoid the errors of corporate-led interventions and build on their progressive tradition in education to provide the basis for a transformation of educational policy and pedagogical
practice. This will allow educationalists to seriously begin to tackle the problem of entrenched inequality and to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

**Resisting pressures of marketisation**

In Finland teachers and principals have played a major role in holding back the tide of neoliberal educational restructuring (Sahlberg and Hargreaves 2011). In New Zealand teacher unions have in the recent past helped to roll back some of the more ideological changes such as bulk-funding and the abolition of school zoning (Wellington Wairarapa School Trustees Association 2013; Dobbins 2009). Teachers have also helped to highlight the dangers inherent in the current changes. The fast-tracking of teachers with little pedagogical training as promoted by Teach First New Zealand will likely reinforce the disparity of achievement between Māori, Pasifika, poor students and others as has been the case in the USA (Patterson 2013; Thompson 2013; Darling-Hammond 2010). Finland’s experience indicates that raising the professional qualifications of teachers across the board improves outcomes for all students (Darling-Hammond 2010 pp.43f).

According to Pasi Sahlberg

> Things like Teach First or Teach for America are very common in many parts of the world, but you do not find them in high-performing education systems (Shuttleworth 2012).

**Charter schools diminish parental choice**

The neoliberal turn has moved to redefine the right to education in terms of a contract between consumers and providers (Olssen 2002; Struyven and Steurs 2005). It is claimed that it must be the responsibility of the individual consumer to “choose” and pay for their education “product” since “Government choice raises the questions of academic freedom from government interference ...” (New Zealand Treasury quoted in Kelsey 1996).

Ironically, the extent of government prescription of governance structures and “outcomes” for New Zealand schools and universities has increased greatly since Treasury issued its stern warning (Olssen 2002; Mutch 2006; Ball and Youdell 2008). Meanwhile, as charter schools proliferate worldwide, the choices are often made by schools cream-skimming rather than students or parents making decisions as to their preferred option, leading to a diminution of parental efficacy rather than “parental choice” (Ladd 2003; Ravitch 2010; Whitty and Power 2000).


*Education for the twenty-first century*

The twenty-first century will require innovative, lateral thinking, risk taking and solidarity - qualities evident in New Zealanders with their can-do attitude, egalitarianism and belief that you can make a difference (Kennedy 2000; Museum of Transport and Technology 2011; Cumming and Taylor 2006). The imposition of market “discipline” to increase “outputs” in search of national competitive advantage can have the unintended consequence of undermining those very qualities (Lolich 2011; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009; Singh 2013). Focusing on placing students’ individual learning foremost requires smaller classes and innovative pedagogy. This approach depends upon providing resources and freedom to take risks while allowing intrinsic motivation to predominate over the pressure for short term returns (Glor 1998; Mulgan and Albury 2003; Hinchcliff 1997).

New Zealand’s premier education system was built on the initiative, far sightedness and dedication of teachers, politicians, policy experts and parents. However the tendency of colonial officials to look to bigger and supposedly better nations for guidance has often led to neglect of brilliant and path breaking local innovations (Marder 2012; Dickson 2009; Ogilvie 1974). Rather than importing “reforms” which exacerbate class and ethnic inequalities (Apple 2004; Hursh 2007; Parsons 2009; Whitty and Power 2000) New Zealand policy makers would do well to look to the nation’s own world leading achievements.
References


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