



Social Justice Imaginaries and Education Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (2017–2024)

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Abstract

In this article, we continue Martin Thrupp’s critical work in education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand by examining the policies of the Sixth Labour-led Government (2017–2023) and the Sixth National-led Government (2023–present). We consider their attempts to mitigate social injustice via education policy and the social imaginaries that underpin such efforts. Our conceptual framework draws on Nancy Fraser’s tripartite analysis (redistribution, recognition, participation), the contributions of education policy scholars who have built upon her work, and others who offer alternative framings of social justice. To contextualise our analysis, we provide a historical account of the discursive shift from equality to equity in New Zealand education policy and the recent transition by the Left from the ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, *The third way: The renewal of social democracy*, Polity Press, 1999) to ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser, *American Affairs* 1:46–64, 2017, Fraser, *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond*, Verso, 2019). Examination of selected education policies by the most recent Labour and National governments reveals that, despite equity infusing the rhetoric of both governments, their actual policies have consistently adopted affirmative responses aimed only at ameliorating inequality’s most visible effects. We conclude with a call for more intentionally transformative efforts in education based on holistic conceptions of social justice.

Keywords Social justice · Education policy · Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

One of Martin Thrupp's main research contributions has been his efforts to collectively analyse the New Zealand education policies that began with the programme of structural adjustment under the Fourth Labour Government (1984–1990), the neoliberal underpinnings of such policies, and the 'persistent middle class advantage' (Thrupp, 2007) they bestow in the schooling marketplace (Thrupp et al., 2010; Thrupp, 1999a, 2017). In this article, we continue this critical work, examining the period from 2017 to the present day.

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has not only gained an increasing, almost ubiquitous, presence in Aotearoa New Zealand society and globally, but also morphed and adapted in different ways to maintain its hegemony. One of the forms that it has adopted in recent years is what feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (2017, 2019) calls 'progressive neoliberalism'. This refers to the co-optation by neoliberalism of social justice discourses related to the so-called 'new social movements'. Such appropriation at least partially explains why social justice calls have become commonplace in current education debates worldwide (Sharma et al., 2023). Indeed, over the last few years, international organisations, ministries of education, commercial interests, academics, teaching councils, unions, professional associations, non-government organisations, charities, lobbyists, activists, educators and students, and both mass and social media have all, in some way or another, raised the flag of equity and social justice in and through education. Of course, at a very basic level this attempted linkage of neoliberalism and social justice is inherently paradoxical: social justice requires a caring disposition (*homines curans*), while neoliberalism prioritises self-maximisation and self-responsibility (*homines economici*) (Lynch, 2022; Tronto, 2017). As we shall see, these contradictions infuse a contemporary education policy discourse that is focused more on piecemeal affirmation or amelioration than on fundamental structural transformation (Fraser, 1997).

In this article, we problematise the apparent consensus around what we might call Aotearoa New Zealand's vernacular social justice imaginaries (after Taylor, 2004) and we analyse attempts to mitigate social inequality through education by the most recent coalition governments (Sixth Labour-led Government 2017–2023, Sixth National-led Government 2023–present). Our point of departure is not only the problematic assumption that education per se can directly mitigate the effects of social inequality, but also that not all efforts to address social inequality through education are driven by the same, shared notions of social justice and, therefore, do not have the same policy discursive intentions or effects.

We first present the conceptual framework for what we are calling a contemporary social justice imaginary. It draws on Nancy Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2000) analysis, the contributions of education policy scholars who have built upon her work (Baker et al., 2009; Lynch, 2012), and others who offer alternative framings of social justice (i.e., Honneth, 1996; Young, 1990). Our aim here is to articulate a multidimensional conception of social justice that allows for the analysis of specific policy discursive demands for social justice in terms of both what they address, and what they marginalise or ignore. We then provide a historical account of the discursive pivot from

equality to equity in New Zealand education policy, which coincided with the move from social democracy to neoliberalism, and the transition by the Left from the ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1999) to ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser, 2017, 2019). In the third part of the article, we examine and compare selected education policies aimed at reducing social inequalities by the latest Labour and National governments. We conclude with a call for more intentionally transformative efforts in education based on a holistic conception of social justice as all of: redistribution, recognition, participation, care, and meaningful work.

A Multidimensional Framework of Social Justice in Education

Charles Taylor defines a social imaginary as:

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor, 2004, p. 23)

His version of a social imaginary concerns the ‘images, stories and legends’ through which ordinary people develop and maintain their conception of their social world, its common practices and collective sense of legitimacy. This common language social imaginary is shared by large, or sometimes all fractions of a society (p. 23). It constitutes a collective sense of how things are and how they should go, and what practices and relations run counter to this collective sensibility. A social imaginary is both background and foreground to our everyday plans, practices and actions. According to John Rawls’ idealised stance (Rawls, 1972), principles of social justice are required in order to be able to choose between various options for organising society, and for assigning rights and duties in social institutions. On this view, we can say that social justice imaginaries conjure a collective sense of “the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (p. 4), what is broadly considered fair and unfair, and of rights and responsibilities, toward self and others. An alternative stance is that our moral and ethical norms, our collective sense of what is appropriate, concerning social justice are already immanent in our actual structural and institutional settlements (Honneth, 2014). In the rest of this section, we unpack such considerations in terms of the following domains of justice: redistribution, recognition, participation, care and meaningful work.

During much of the 19th and the twentieth centuries, Left-wing social justice imaginaries in the Western world adhered, to a large extent, to: (i) Marxist ideologies, which were primarily concerned with economic matters, workers’ rights and class struggle; and (ii) critical social theory which emphasised the construction and maintenance of social power and society as “relations of social domination” (Honneth, 1993, p. xii). The rise of the so-called ‘New Left’ movement in the 1960s and 1970s marked a shift in the balance of these imaginaries, which became increasingly focused on moral and cultural recognition. Perhaps two of the most influential thinkers in this space have been Axel Honneth and Iris

Marion Young, who view injustice as systematic and structural oppression in the form of everyday practices and norms. Honneth's perspective on social justice and social freedom focuses on the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1996). On this view, subjects only gain recognition, personal freedom and realise the possibility of leading an ethical life in community with and through others, that is intersubjectively and interdependently. When we come to see ourselves in our 'interaction partner' we appreciate that we can only really be free when others are also free. In Honneth's view, the basis of socially just recognition is love, rights and solidarity. These shape patterns of intersubjective recognition; their absence patterns of misrecognition. Primary loving relationships within the family provide emotional support for needs and feelings; participation in social institutions provides cognitive respect, confers legal rights, enables self-respect and develops a sense of moral responsibility; while membership of valued social communities develops personal traits and abilities and provides solidary social esteem for one's unique contribution to the community. Conversely, misrecognition or a failure to recognise and accord or receive positive status can lead to abuse and threats to one's physical integrity; to denial of rights and inclusion, and the attendant loss of social integrity; or to denigration and insult, and the attendant loss of honour and dignity (Honneth, 1996). A paradigm example of these recognition issues in contemporary New Zealand education policy discourse has been the increasingly explicit attention given to the importance of 'language, culture, and identity' to Māori students' and to Pacific students' senses of belonging in English medium schooling.

Iris Marion Young's work has deeply interwoven the recognition domain of justice with that of oppression and inequality of participation. As she argues, "injustice refers primarily to two forms of disabling constraints, oppression and domination" (Young, 1990, p. 39). On her account, the most egregious and commonplace forms of oppression refer to the:

vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

Because these relations of injustice are structural and systemic, oppressed groups may not have an identifiable oppressing group acting consciously and intentionally. Equally, members of oppressed groups are themselves diverse and may experience oppression in some social contexts and practices, but not others, or in different ways. According to Young, we should see oppression, then, as a structural construct and focus on "the exercise of power as the effects of often liberal and 'humane' practices" (p. 41) such as compulsory schooling. Consequently, for Young, "the concept of justice is coextensive with the political" (p. 9), and politics is in this sense a social struggle that includes all aspects of institutional organisation, practices and meanings amenable to "collective evaluation and decision making" (p. 9) to effect change.

The ascendancy of struggles for recognition coincided with a general societal decline in confidence in the capacity or desirability of post-welfarist states to

maintain economic redistribution efforts following the neoliberal turn of the 1980s. As noted by Miller (2013):

There is evidence that public opinion, even in countries with strong traditions of social democracy, has become more tolerant of inequality. Fewer people now think that it is part of the state's business to redistribute wealth and income in favour of the poor (Miller, 2013, p. 1)

Philosopher Nancy Fraser initially developed a bi-dimensional framework of social justice to challenge what she saw as the false dichotomy between cultural recognition and economic redistribution. For Fraser (1995, 1997), demands for social justice fall into two categories that are increasingly polarised and dissociated from one another: claims for the recognition of cultural difference and claims for the redistribution of economic resources. Her framework acknowledges the *analytical* distinction between these two categories (i.e., recognition and redistribution), yet she considers both forms of injustice as deeply interrelated. In contrast to recognitive justice philosophers (e.g., Honneth, 1996; Taylor, 2004; Young, 1990), Fraser spotlights the tensions between these two forms of politics. After all, she argues, the ultimate form of injustice for the former is cultural domination, while for the latter it is economic exploitation/deprivation. Articulation of the tensions between recognition and redistribution allows her to develop a framework that encompasses both dimensions “without reducing either one of them to the other” (Fraser, 1997, p. 5). The two dimensions of social justice are juxtaposed against two broad approaches to remedy injustice: affirmation and transformation. Affirmative remedies for injustice refer to those aimed at “correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them” (Fraser, 1997, p. 23). Transformative remedies, in contrast, are those aimed at restructuring the underlying generative framework of injustice. Fraser (2000) argues that most recent forms of identity politics have followed affirmative remedies the effect of which has been to reify group identities, lead to greater separation/intolerance, and displace matters of distributive justice. In this early phase of her work, she calls for a combination of transformative cultural and socioeconomic politics.

The false dilemma (Fraser, 1995) of redistribution versus recognition has also been evident in New Zealand social justice debates, particularly in relation to how to remedy the educational disparities between Pākehā students as a group and Māori students as a group. As a reaction to a long-standing egalitarian tradition primarily focused on socio-economic variables, culturalists have claimed for the need to recognise and redress the forms of cultural domination and subordination that are fundamentally embedded in English medium schooling (e.g., Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop & Glynn, 2003). However, some scholars (Poata-Smith, 1996; Stewart, 2018; Thrupp & Mika, 2012) argue that this position has often led to the dismissal or obfuscation of socioeconomic inequalities. Socioeconomic obfuscation is also evident in the influential effective teaching discourse, most notably the *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)* (Alton-Lee, 2003) and the *Visible Learning* book (Hattie, 2009). Both of these have significantly influenced the trajectory of official New Zealand education policy discourse. In great part this is attributable to their

casuistic arguments that teachers can do nothing about students' socio-economic circumstances and that therefore policy should concentrate on improving pedagogical knowledge, skills and dispositions because these are the greatest influence on student achievement *within* the classroom. Recent attempts to examine the unhelpfully labelled Māori education or achievement 'gap' (Chapple et al., 1997) have, nonetheless, begun to integrate aspects of both distribution and recognition (e.g., Krzyzosiak & Stewart, 2019; Van Meijl, 2020).

In the 2000s, Fraser (2005, 2010) reformulated her framework of social justice to include a third element: participation. Fraser acknowledged that her bi-dimensional framework was an inadequate model of justice for a time of accelerated globalisation in which struggles about justice are primarily disputes over who is a member of a community and what the community is. As Fraser (2007) explains, such forms of political justice require:

social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. On the view of justice as participatory parity, overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction (p. 27)

This political dimension of justice can also lead to affirmative remedies (e.g., provision of voting rights) and transformative measures (e.g., restructuring the root causes that give rise to impairment of full participatory parity for a particular group).

Fraser's tripartite model has been widely used and also expanded by educational scholars. For example, Martin Mills and colleagues (Mills et al., 2015) draw on Fraser to analyse alternative education provision in three Australian states. However, they use Kathleen Lynch's and Andrew Sayer's work to argue the need to expand the Fraser framework as it applies to educational settings to include affective justice and contributive justice respectively.

Love, care and solidarity issues are described by Lynch and colleagues as the affective equality dimension of a more capacious conception of social justice (Baker et al., 2009). Affective equality is about the capability (freedom and opportunity) to give and to receive care as an essential characteristic of social relationships and development, including in education.

Being deprived of the capacity to develop supportive, affective relations of love, care and solidarity, or the experience of engaging in them when one has capacity, is therefore a serious human deprivation for most people: it is a core dimension of affective inequality. (Lynch et al., 2009, p. 1)

Similarly, in terms of schooling as meaningful work, Mills and colleagues' (Mills et al., 2015) analysis of alternative education settings draws on Sayer's (2011) argument for the need to challenge hegemonic expertise hierarchies (i.e., between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' work) and ensure that all work roles allow workers to contribute to decision-making and the organisation of work. Sayer describes this as contributive justice. Work is an important dimension of justice because the kinds of work people engage in, including institutionalised forms of learning and

teaching, have “far-reaching effects on the kinds of people they become, on how they view themselves and are viewed by others, and hence on the quality of their lives” (Sayer, 2011, p. 9).

As Martin Thrupp’s studies of secondary school credentialing (Thrupp, 1999b), performative school management discourses (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), and primary school standards (Thrupp, 2018) demonstrated, political ideologies and education policy framings combine to generate differentiated schooling work regimes for students and educators, according to the different forms of capital held by students and their families. Students and educators whose day-to-day relations are formed in conditions of socio-economic inequality often engage in less educationally meaningful and rewarding work, with predictable consequences for how they see themselves and their positioning within hegemonic imaginaries of schooling success and failure. These additions to the Fraser model are helpful in addressing issues of (more than economic) wellbeing and the rights of students to participate in curriculum decision-making (broadly defined).

From Equality to Equity: Neoliberalism and Education Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand

The educational aspiration of building a fairer society has always been part of the schooling narrative in Aotearoa New Zealand (Codd & Openshaw, 2005). Yet, the meanings of what constitutes a fair society and the role of education in this have varied greatly over time. With the emergence of the Keynesian welfare state in the decades following the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II, social democratic values, egalitarian ideals and a strong sense of public good underpinned the educational aspirations of the time. The dominant educational ideology of the welfare state was well outlined in the 1943 Thomas Report and perhaps best encapsulated by Peter Fraser’s famous quote:

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. (Fraser, 1939, pp. 2–3)

Over the decades that followed the First Labour Government (1935–1949), the realisation of this educational ideology, however, proved to be not as egalitarian as it promised, particularly for women, for Māori, for Pacific Islands diaspora communities, and for those living with disabilities. By the early 1970s, feminist and Māori critiques of their invisibility and exclusion in education increasingly questioned the ideology of equal opportunities (Middleton, 1987; Walker, 2016). In the mid-1980s, a curriculum review committee conducted national consultations with community groups, revealing long standing criticisms of entrenched inequalities and discrimination in education. The resulting Curriculum Review report prioritised these concerns and made significant statements about the need for a non-sexist, non-racist curriculum, bringing the post-war vision of a socially democratic education for all closer to reality (Court & O’Neill, 2011).

The document was well-received by many in the education community, who saw it as a harbinger of significant educational reform. However, conservative groups, including the New Zealand Treasury, reacted with criticism and scepticism, either openly opposing its ideological stance or expressing doubts about the feasibility of its recommendations (Codd & Openshaw, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly given the rise of neoliberalism in other Western countries at the time, in what Bourdieu (2001) calls the ‘conservative revolution’, the Curriculum Review efforts were in vain. The newly re-elected fourth Labour government, Prime Minister and Minister of Education David Lange instead prioritised a radical reform of educational administration. In the schooling sector, this became the *Tomorrow’s Schools* reform; the equivalents for ECE and tertiary education were *Before Five* and *Learning for Life* respectively. The reform had efficiency and devolution of decision making from central bureaucracy to elected board of trustees at the core of its agenda. Yet, the idea of ‘treating different groups differently’ (i.e., equity) that the New Left social movements began to advocate in the previous decades and that attracted wide support from educationalists during the Curriculum Review process was also taken up by this reform, albeit in a rather paradoxical way (Codd, 1993). The Picot Report (Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988) that informed *Tomorrow’s Schools* (Lange, 1988) committed to the arguably competing social goals of choice and equity for the sake of greater efficiency. This report strategically combined these two competing agendas by presenting state administration of the education system as neither equitable nor efficient (Codd, 1993; Codd & Openshaw, 2005). The combination of such goals made the reform highly persuasive. As Codd and Openshaw (2005) explain, these competing agendas appealed to different groups:

...on the one hand, the educationalists were generally in favour of more local involvement and were committed to a system that would provide equity. On the other hand, the Treasury, the State Services Commission and business interests favoured more local control and the provision of greater choice. (p. 177)

The ideologies advocated by the Treasury and the State Services Commission in the reform were not fully aligned either. While the former was underpinned by a market liberalist ideology, the latter was a supporter of new public management, the ideology that ended up most forcefully driving the reform (see Court & O’Neill, 2011; Dale & Jesson, 1993). Views on how to address the issue of ‘equity’ while reducing the role of the state also differed. For the Treasury, the provision of equity was connected to individual choice; a view explicitly stated in the Picot Report (Lange, 1988): “...we see the creation of more choice in the system as a way of ensuring greater efficiency and equity” (p. 4). For the State Services Commission, equity was to be guaranteed via efficiency. Both choice and efficiency implied cost cutting, which made the appropriation of equity ideals and, particularly, their argument of ‘targeted funding’ for ‘educationally disadvantaged’ groups very appealing for both New Right-market advocates and managerialist precursors. The rationale of choice also supported Māori initiatives for self-determining institutions and programmes. Stewart’s (2018) analysis of the effect of the reform for Māori 30 years later concluded that:

the policies recommended by the Treasury brief have had contradictory effects because on one hand, Māori have taken up the opportunities afforded by policies of ‘choice’ to establish KKM [Kura Kaupapa Māori] and other Kaupapa Māori and Māori-medium (including bilingual) initiatives, but on the other hand, statistical inequity for Māori in education remains as large as ever (p. 174).

For Stewart (2018), this contradiction lay in the Treasury brief’s dismissal of socio-economic inequalities to explain the ‘Māori gap’. As Stewart explains, this dismissal was initiated with a key ‘ideological manoeuvre’, which consisted of disregarding socioeconomic factors under the rationale that these cannot be considered as *fully* explanatory of Māori educational underachievement (a similar ideological manoeuvre occurred in the 2000s, as we show below).

In the decade that followed, the fourth National-led government took a more regressive direction, favouring those aspects of the reforms most closely aligned with the New Right and discouraging those that promoted further community involvement and equity (see Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Lauder et al., 1999; Thrupp, 1999a, 1999b). Policies such as the 1996 Targeted Individual Entitlement (TIE) scheme and the 1998 Māori TIE scheme, which allowed children from low-income families to access private education, exemplified a “deserving poor” approach to compensate for inequalities in education (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010, p. xx). In the second decade after the reforms, the fifth Labour-led government adopted an approach described by Thrupp and Irwin (2010) as follows: “Labour did not so much undo the neoliberal project in New Zealand education as take some of the rough edges off it: producing neoliberalism tempered with a social conscience” (p. xviii). This ‘Third Way’ approach (Giddens, 1999) did not question the managerialist basis of the reforms, but rejected some of the market fundamentalist principles that underpin them. As explained by Codd (2005), this approach by the fifth Labour-led government emphasised “the renewal of civil society, inclusiveness and social responsibility, but also embraced individualism, economic freedom and globalisation” (p. 9).

During this term (1999–2008), as public funding became more constrained and, therefore, unable to maintain the Fraser-Beeby era of universal equal right to free, high quality schooling, the language of equity, combined with a managerialist approach, replaced that of equality. This ‘Third way’ combination of equity and managerialism was at the core of the pan-government initiative to ‘close the gaps’ in social and economic outcomes between Māori and Pacific groups and the general population (Piercy et al., 2017). The new emphasis on equity and ‘closing the gaps’ under managerialist rationales led to new achievement standards reporting requirements for schools via the Education Standards Act 2001, and also provided a justification for the allocation of equity funds to schools on an ‘economically efficient’, ‘targeted investment’ rather than on a universal provision. Also during this time, the fifth Labour-led government’s ‘Third Way’ approach placed the idea of well-being at the forefront, building upon earlier efforts initiated by the preceding National-led administration, such as incorporating well-being (a quasi-economised care discourse) into the *Health and Physical Education Curriculum* in 1999. There was a clear correlation between well-being and the managerialist doctrine encompassing performance, standards, quantifiable results

and self-responsibilisation, which became evident in early policies that socialised this principle (see Craig, 2006; Weijers & Morrison, 2018). The Treasury's *Investing in Well-being* framework (Jacobsen et al., 2002) illustrated this nexus, serving to guide the Government on optimising returns from its financial commitments to social policies, as stated by then Acting Treasury Secretary John Whitehead. Informed by psychological theories, the framework prioritised risk identification, leading to targeted resource allocation contingent on evaluations influenced by risk factors rather than the provision of universally available support.

The fifth National-led government (2008–2017) took a more explicitly market-liberal approach to education policies such as favouring privatisation through Public Private Partnerships, the introduction of National Standards and the support of edubusinesses (Thrupp, 2017). The marginalisation and dismissal of the importance of socioeconomic factors continued, yet in more obvious ways. As National's Minister of Education Nikki Kaye stated, when announcing a change in the calculation of targeted funding for educational achievement from census-based school deciles (i.e., community socio-economic disadvantage) to a 'risk index' derived from government department datasets (i.e., numbers of 'at risk' children enrolled at each school): "We want to change the conversation as a country to be not about the socio-economic status of a neighbourhood, but to be about teaching and learning at schools" (Jones, 2017). Under this fifth National-led government, well-being discourses continued to grow, reflecting broader international interest in this matter led by the OECD (see Weijers & Jarden, 2017). The publication of the Treasury's *Living Standards Framework* in 2011 was perhaps the most obvious landmark. According to this well-being framework, the approach taken towards equity issues was that of 'social investment'. As O'Neill (2016) explains though, targeted social investment as an equity strategy, while aimed at ensuring the most efficient use of resources, and timely interventions, inevitably implied benefitting some learners at the expense of others. It was a shift yet further away from universalism in state schooling policy; that is, a shift away from the idea of education as a right and the provision of fully funded, high-quality education for all. National's version of a 'third way' approach during this term also began to embrace progressive neoliberalism with equity initiatives related to identity politics, such as the curriculum policy guidelines for sexuality education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015), which "engage more explicitly with issues of inclusion, especially related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and gender and sexually diverse (LGBTQ+) students" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022, p. 135) and the Pasifika Education Plan 2013–2017, with its vision for "Five out of five Pasifika learners participating, engaging and achieving in education, secure in their identities, languages and cultures and contributing fully to Aotearoa New Zealand's social, cultural and economic wellbeing" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3), which clearly linked the affirmation of cultural identities to economic goals.

Social Justice in the Education Policy of the Sixth Labour Government 2017–2023

Resonating with the global rise of progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2017, 2019), the Sixth Labour government explicitly embraced the attendant shift towards cultural identity politics and recognitive justice in education policy that was also evident in some policy decisions of the National-led government in the previous term, in part due to the presence of The Māori Party on the government benches. Yet, this shift did not imply a rupture with the ‘Third way’ policies of managerialism and well-being of the previous Labour-led (1999–2008) and National-led (2008–2017) governments. Indeed, education policies under this Labour-led government continued the use of targeted social investment for the redistribution of resources and the emphasis on psychological well-being, albeit combined with policies explicitly aligned with its version of a social justice imaginary. In this section, we analyse three groups of policies in detail. As we argue, each of them aimed to address a different dimension of social justice (economic, affective, and cultural-recognitive injustices, respectively), yet they primarily comprised affirmative rather than transformative political strategies. Indeed, the ideological and structural bases of the ‘managed marketplace’ of early childhood, compulsory and post-compulsory education that had become normalised since the late 1980s remained largely unchanged.

Between 2017 and 2023, the Sixth Labour Government emphasised well-being as an overarching priority within their legislative, policy and work programme agenda. According to Finance Minister Grant Robertson, their objective was to establish “a better, kinder, more inclusive nation” (Stuff, 2019). An essential component of this explicit affective-recognitive justice strategy entailed implementing the Budget Policy Statement, which mandated that all fiscal decisions and non-monetary choices made by the government take into account their influence on individuals’ overall well-being. The *Living Standards Framework* developed by Treasury was used to operationalise their notion of well-being, which included not only psychological factors but also wider social variables. In this ‘well-being approach’ (Fletcher, 2019), education was seen to play a crucial role and a series of education policies were approved at this time to align with it. The subsequent Education and Training Act 2020 and its Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities and the Tertiary Education Strategy (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020b) had, as a primary goal, ensuring “the success and wellbeing of all learners”. As part of the government’s well-being strategy, the Ministry of Education was committed to “addressing systemic issues within the education system” (*Education Conversation Kōrero Mātauranga*, 2021, online) and embarked on a process to “transform our education system into one that delivers excellent and equitable outcomes for all children and learners” based on the following diagnosis:

New Zealand’s education system performs well for many children and learners, but there are also many who are not served well by our current system, particularly Māori and Pacific learners, those with disabilities and/or learning support needs, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We must do more to address systemic issues, such as falling levels of academic achievement in

maths and science, poor and declining rates of attendance, and relatively high levels of exposure to bullying. (Office of the Minister of Education, 2021, p. 1)

The above diagnosis was an official summary of the findings from the independent Taskforce commissioned by the Government to review the effects of the Tomorrow's Schools reform (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, 2019). This framing (see Thrupp & McChesney, 2019) served as a justification to focus on those 'minority' groups that the 'education system was leaving behind', a framing criticized by Martin Thrupp for both enabling a politics of blame towards schools/teachers and lacking a unified narrative of high-quality education for all (see Thrupp & McChesney, 2019). Even so, the focus on 'underserved' groups within a system where many students succeeded did enable the Taskforce to make recommendations for explicit redistribution, recognition and caring policy change. However, in Fraser's terms, these could only plausibly be described as affirmative remedies. Arguably the most important redistribution policy commitment of this kind approved by the Sixth Labour-led government was a cluster of targeting initiatives, encompassing various redistributive, recognitive and affective justifications. These included: (i) renaming the Risk Index announced by the previous National-led government as the Equity Index, and revising it to fund on the basis of the school's socio-economic disadvantage profile as a whole, rather than the numbers of individual students in the 25 percent most at risk nationally; (ii) per student grants to a targeted majority of schools that stopped requesting donations from families; (iii) a free school lunches scheme to a targeted minority of schools; and (iv) targeted increased numbers of counsellors, social workers and nurses, and free period products in all schools. These were part of the government's *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019), which introduced an explicit affective equality outcome indicator that all children should be 'loved, safe and nurtured'.

The Equity Index replaced the decile based system with the intention "to better allocate equity funding and to identify schools that would benefit from additional resources" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022a, 2022b, p. 3). In its preliminary report the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce (2018) had recommended an increase in targeted equity funding through the Index from 3 percent to six percent of overall schools funding, to broadly match the OECD average. In its final report, it judged that to address the magnitude of educational and socio-economic inequities, this should be increased to ten percent (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2019). The government opted for a six percent target increase and a four-year transition period.

As Cathy Wylie (2013) has reported, despite additional government per student funding to address socio-economic inequities, many poorer schools have consistently raised less money to spend each year than wealthier schools because the latter can solicit much greater amounts of donations from parents, fundraising and international student fees (the latter mainly in secondary schools, and predominantly in more social-economically advantaged communities). This illustrates what Martin Thrupp called the 'inconvenient truth' of education; that is, the use of education by middle classes as means for positional advantage (Thrupp, 2007). As a partial

response, in 2019 the Labour-led government introduced a redistributive policy to make a per student annual grant to schools that agreed to no longer request parental donations. The Education and Workforce Select Committee's commentary on the Bill illustrated the political challenges of attempting targeted redistribution. While the Labour-led majority on the Committee supported the Bill, the National Party minority view was that: (i) excluding higher decile 8–10 schools from the scheme would create a funding inequity because significant numbers of disadvantaged children attended wealthier schools; (ii) a fairer approach would be to scrap decile funding altogether and fund all schools more fairly to obviate the need for parent donations, and, (iii) paradoxically, wealthier schools would not wish to enter the scheme because they already raised far more through donations than the amount offered by government (Education (School Donations) Amendment Bill, 2019).

Another redistributive policy approved by Labour under the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* was the Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunch programme aimed at providing free, healthy lunches for approximately 217,000 students per day (Office of the Minister of Education, 2021, p. 7). This policy is *par excellence* an affirmative form of politics, as its goal was not so much questioning or altering the class-based system of Aotearoa New Zealand's society but mitigating the effects of the so-called 'economic disadvantage' (in this case, the euphemistically named 'food insecurity'). Other redistributive policies, such as the provision of digital devices for students 'at risk' of digital exclusion, had similar intentions.

As part of the government's well-being strategy, the Ministry of Education also approved a series of care-related policies. These included the Counselling in Schools initiative that provided counselling services for the 200 schools in 'greatest need' according to the Equity Index, the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 (including its modification to include domestic tertiary students) and the development of (mental) health resources and guidelines. As part of their narrative, these policies claimed to be particularly catering for the most vulnerable. These policies, however, not only concentrated on the visible effect of injustice (rather than the causes), but also consecrated the use of 'psy' concepts (trauma, distress, etc.) to describe social problems, a process that Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) have termed the 'therapisation of social justice'. This approach leads to a therapeutic culture focused on the individual and/or their immediate community to ameliorate the impact of injustice. As an example, the guidelines for mental health education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022b) primarily focus on individual skill development and school-level interpersonal relationships, despite formal recognition of cultural and political (interestingly, not economic) factors involved in students' psychological well-being. As these guidelines state:

[quality mental health education] enables ākonga to become strong in their identities and to become increasingly aware of what they need to support their mental wellbeing. It equips them with skills and strategies to meet challenges, adapt to change, and respond decisively to cultures of social exclusion. (p. 7)

The above focus on skill development was encouraged together with the creation of an inclusive learning environment at schools. This approach, however, not only implied a renewed version of the politics of blame (see O'Neill, 2010; Thrupp,

1998), but also a focus on the effects rather than the causes of discrimination that often lead to mental health issues. An illustrative example of this focus can be seen in the specific guidelines offered on how to deal with “students’ increasing dissatisfaction with their bodies”. Rather than critically analysing the role of patriarchy and private interests (e.g., food, cosmetic, fitness... industries) in students’ body size and self-perceptions, the guidelines recommend promoting “an inclusive school culture [that] accepts and values diverse body shapes and sizes” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022a, 2022b, p. 44). Affirmation of identity reflects the government’s intentional connection between well-being discourses and identity politics; a connection also very evident in the *Relationships and Sexuality Education: A Guide for Teachers, Leaders, and Boards of Trustees* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020a).

The Sixth Labour government’s ambitious education work programme was characterised from the outset by a normative backdrop of recognitive and representative dimensions of social justice, as evidenced in the two national education Summits on the future of education that started the Education Conversation | Kōreo Mātauranga. According to the dedicated event website (<https://conversation.education.govt.nz/>), these were attended by a diverse group of around 1400 invited community, sector and NGO representatives in 2018. The Summits and related “wānanga, fono and other meetings held with particular communities” generated some 43,000 responses, and a series of reports that were claimed to “summaris[e] the views of people whose voices are not traditionally heard in conversations about education”. Labour-led policies that explicitly focused on the politics of recognition and parity of participation (i.e., representation) during the years that followed included the emphasis on decolonisation in Te Mātaiaho (curriculum refresh), the approval of the new histories curriculum, the launch of the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 and Te Ahu o Te Reo to improve te reo Māori use, proficiency and acquisition across the education sector. Among these, perhaps the policy that Labour was most proud of (see statement by PM Jacinda Ardern in McConnell, 2022) was the new histories curriculum, which recognised Māori history as foundational of Aotearoa New Zealand and emphasised the colonisation process and its effects. In contrast, references to the ‘politics of redistribution’ in this curriculum were rare, a continuation from previous curricula (Tatebe et al., 2019). As an example, the words ‘capitalism’, ‘social class’ or ‘neoliberalism’ are not mentioned once in the whole curriculum and references to economic inequality and poverty are scarce (see Estellés, Rozas-Gómez, Morgan, & Shafer, in this special issue, 2024). Similarly, the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030, while insisting on confronting systemic racism at schools and the importance of culturally responsive teaching (arguably a renewed version of the politics of blame, as it placed most of the responsibility on teachers), issues of redistributive justice are completely missing from the framework of the Plan. These policies, therefore, portray colonisation and racism in both Aotearoa New Zealand’s society and schools as a phenomenon completely disassociated from capitalism. These policies are a clear example of what Nancy Fraser (2017, 2019) calls the *displacement* of politics of redistribution from politics of recognition in the context of progressive neoliberalism.

Social Justice and Education Policy in the Sixth National Government (2023–)

Formed in November 2023, the current National-led government comprises a centre-Right National, Libertarian ACT, and populist New Zealand First coalition. While the period examined here barely covers a year, the government has already announced several education policies that signal notable reversals from the direction taken by Labour as well as some pragmatic continuities.

On our analysis, a ‘meritocratic sensibility’ (Sandel, 2020) acts as the bed-rock of a relatively austere, residual social justice dimension within the National-led government’s progressive neoliberal imaginary. According to this sensibility, education is claimed to play a key role in ensuring the provision of equal opportunities for all. As Finance Minister Hon Nicola Willis put it in the announcement of the 2024 Budget: “Education is the great liberator, the great equaliser and the most enduring gift we can bestow on our children”. The connection with the economy was unambiguous: “To my mind, improving the results we get from our education system is the single most important thing we can do to improve the future productivity of New Zealand”.

According to the neoliberal imaginary, education is understood as personal skills development for workforce participation and the imperative to take on the persona of an entrepreneurial, self-responsible citizen. Lynch (2022, p. 125) notes how education is focused “on the development of the individualized market citizen”. Education allows subjects to overcome any cultural and socio-economic barrier and “improve their condition by exercising their talent and their ingenuity” (Sandel, 2020, p. 114). Yet, for Lynch, this self-improvement is narrowly defined because what neoliberalism does “is to glorify *homo economicus* above the cultural or politically engaged citizen” (Lynch, 2022, p. 125). In short, “neoliberal capitalism also lays claim to servicing social justice and the common good by rewarding the meritorious, the ‘intelligent and hardworking’” (p. 29). The logic of this imaginary limits educational interventions to affirmative strategies that reduce to a socially acceptable level only the most visible effects of inequalities rather than transforming their root causes.

While the National-led government began the term with a number of controversies over the histories and sexualities curricula (perhaps to keep its coalition partners ACT and NZ First onside) (see INews Reporters, 2023; Burns, 2023), recent announcement by Minister of Education Hon Erica Stanford on the Government’s six priorities in education have adopted a more ‘pragmatic outlook’, as Martin Thrupp (2017) would have described it. In this approach, struggles over cultural recognition are backgrounded and the focus is placed instead on the ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity. As the document outlining the Minister of Education’s priorities states, “Every child deserves the opportunity to succeed, achieve to the best of their ability and gain qualifications that will support them into further study and employment”. The curriculum has been at the centre of this ideological shift: “A systematic failure to teach all children the knowledge they need in order to understand what the next grade has to offer is the major source

of avoidable injustice in our schools” (Office of the Minister of Education, 2024, pp. 4–5). In this arena, it has been key to the extraordinarily rapid and burgeoning influence exerted by the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) for Education led by Dr Michael Johnston, a cognitive psychologist and statistician, and Senior Fellow responsible for Education at the libertarian thinktank, The New Zealand Initiative. The MAG’s remit was to make recommendations regarding curriculum and teaching methods, initially in the senior secondary school (New Zealand Government, 2024). In practice, and with the active support of Minister of Education Stanford, it has proven to be a proselytising vehicle for a cluster of ‘science of learning’, ‘structured instruction’ and ‘knowledge rich curriculum’ ideologies favoured by Johnston and various members of the MAG across both primary and secondary schooling. To date there is some evidence that the priorities of the MAG seem set to undermine the Te Tiriti o Waitangi-focused cultural recognition and representation efforts that had characterised curriculum MAG initiatives under the previous Labour-led government.

National’s ‘pragmatic’ approach has included maintaining some redistributive and culturally affirmative policies through continuation of the Healthy School Lunches Programme and the increasing funding for Kōhanga Reo, which have wide public support (e.g., Dexter, 2024; Paterson, 2024). As part of this ‘pragmatic’ approach, National is also reinforcing the fiscal responsibility and sustainability principles of managerialism and equity of the previous governments but underpinned by an explicit ideology of fiscal responsibility and sustainability through social investment (i.e., “getting the most value of every dollar spent”), such as targeted learning support. The rationale is clear: data needs to be effectively collected and analysed to make sure the limited funds get to where they are most needed.

In contrast to the previous Labour-led government, however, the National-led government has more openly embraced neoliberal faith in the ability of the market to solve social problems. This is most evident in the Education and Training Amendment Bill’s proposals to: (i) further liberalise the marketplace for early learning services; and (ii) reintroduce an expanded version of the controversial charter schooling scheme that was established under a previous National-Act coalition agreement (Education and Training Amendment Bill, 2024). The ACT party’s, with Associate Minister of Education Hon David Seymour, has been particularly influential in the funding of charter schools. As announced in May 2024, “\$153 million in new funding will be provided over four years to establish and operate up to 15 new charter schools and convert 35 state schools to charter schools” (Seymour, 2024, online), a clear manoeuvre to privatise public education, yet enacted in the name of autonomy/participation, diversity and equity. As stated by Associate Minister Seymour in the announcement of this policy:

Charter schools provide educators with greater autonomy, create diversity in New Zealand’s education system, free educators from state and union interference, and raise overall educational achievement, especially for students who are underachieving or disengaged from the current system (Seymour, 2024, online).

However, this consecration of choice via explicit privatisation encouraged by ACT, however, has also been advanced at the expense of cultural and political recognition. Unlike State schools, in the Bill “there will be no formal requirement to ensure charter schools’ plans, policies and curricula reflect local tikanga Māori, mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori, or to take reasonable steps to make instruction in tikanga Māori and te reo Māori” 2024, p. 10). The Bill would also vest school governance rights exclusively in the private charter school sponsor, remove mandatory parent, student and staff governance representation at the local school community level, and enable sponsors to appoint unqualified teachers to permanent teaching positions. These challenges to what appeared to be established recognitive and representative social justice norms were introduced under urgency and, like the curriculum changes discussed above, have not been subject to normal stakeholder and public consultation processes under the vague justification of “short timeframes” for policy operationalisation and implementation in 2025 (see Departmental Disclosure Statement. Education and Training Amendment Bill, 2024, p. 10).

In the social justice domains of caring and meaningful work, the National-led government has signalled a clear move towards the deprofessionalisation of teachers’ work in its recently announced policies (Couch et al., 2024; Locke et al., 2024). A move that is not new for National, as Martin Thrupp (e.g., Thrupp & White, 2013) has denounced on several occasions. The autonomy for charter schools to employ both qualified and unqualified teachers on individual contracts outside of agreed union pay scales and conditions (as seen in the quote above) and, via a subsequent amendment, to limit the role of teacher unions in collective bargaining has been one of the mechanisms. Seymour’s promise to ease the qualification requirements for early childhood education teachers and the Ministry’s recent announcement of a \$53 million increase for teacher training and recruitment funding, supported by an ERO report (Education Review Office, 2024) of questionable research quality (Butler & Carpendale, 2024), are also policies that will likely devalue the meaningful and caring professional work that teachers do by displacing their tertiary education in favour of an apprenticeship approach (Couch et al., 2024; Locke et al., 2024). The explicit goal of these policies is to solve the recurring problem of teacher shortages in the country, which, for National, constitutes a barrier for the realisation of the meritocratic educational ideal. Yet, again, instead of addressing the roots of the problem (i.e., a profession with low social status and economic reward), the response is an affirmative measure aimed at easing the entry to the profession. National’s portrayals of teaching through a cognitivist, rationalistic, and ‘care-less’ (Baker et al., 2009) lens in other policies also demonstrate a devaluation of teachers’ occupational commitments to meaningful and caring work, and to the importance of prioritising care and meaningful work for students in both curriculum and pedagogical relations. As an example, the argument advanced for more curriculum resources simultaneously reduces teachers’ work to that of faithful and dutiful curriculum implementers:

Curriculum resources that are clear, accessible and practical for use will remove unnecessary teacher workload. Teachers will instead be able to focus on what they do best, teaching the national curriculum in ways that

are relevant and exciting for their learners (Office of the Minister of Education, 2024, p. 8)

Conclusion

In 2005, Martin Thrupp and Sally Tomlinson observed that: “‘social justice’ is one of those politically malleable and essentially contested phrases which can mean all things to all people” (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 549). Almost 20 years later, their words seem as relevant as ever. Because of social justice’s indeterminate meaning, they cautioned that efforts to tackle social justice through education policy cannot be taken at face value. In this article, we have sketched a multidimensional social justice framework based on redistribution, recognition, participation, care and meaningful work to help us analyse the education policies of the most recent Labour and National-led governments in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our analysis has revealed that, despite the rhetorical claims of both governments, practical education policy initiatives to address inequality have invariably constituted affirmative responses intended to ameliorate its surface effects rather than to transform its root causes. Shackled by narrow interpretations of statutory requirements for fiscal responsibility and sustainability, recent education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand exhibits many of the characteristics of progressive neoliberalism albeit shuttling back and forth between the Labour-led governments’ imaginary grounded in affirmative cultural and recognitive justice; and National-led governments’ equivalent grounded in meritocratic social justice. While this decades-long impasse might leave educators and education policy scholars in despair, we would like to invoke, once again, Martin’s wisdom: “the social justice challenge for education policy today is one of ‘complex hope’” (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 550). By enriching our understanding of the complex interwoven threads of our vernacular social justice imaginary in education, we are hopefully better prepared to pursue claims for policies that go beyond mere affirmation.

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Declarations

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