



MAXIM
INSTITUTE

DISCUSSION PAPER

WHY DO I HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research note explores the question: what is school for in Aotearoa New Zealand? More precisely, it unpacks the differing and, at times opposing, answers New Zealanders have favoured in response to this question.

Up until recently, the Ministry of Education's vision statement committed to ensuring that every New Zealander:

- is strong in their national and cultural identity;
- aspires for themselves and their children to achieve more;
- has the choice and opportunity to be the best they can be;
- is an active participant and citizen in creating a strong civil society; and,
- is productive, valued and competitive in the world.

This list represents an historical legacy of ideas and aspirations, from the patriotism of the post-war period to the rise, fall and rise again of values education and a dedication to the knowledge economy. Rather than the "reorientation of the education system" called for by the education reformers, Clarence Beeby and Peter Fraser, in 1939, the mission of public schooling has expanded to integrate a growing list of desired outcomes and values. The curriculum is now a Frankenstein's monster of historical and contemporary objectives and pedagogies that create confusion and inefficiency.

If we want to improve school outcomes, it is imperative that we figure out what we are hoping to achieve. If we are going to test our students and judge their teachers, we need to be clear which standards they are being measured against. We need a national conversation on what school is for. We need a government who will honour the time and energy that students, parents and teachers commit to education, as well as the taxpayer dollars that fund it. At the same time, we need to recognise that this time, energy and money is finite, and we cannot achieve all of our educational desires, however laudable they might be. Instead of adding to the present milieu of half-remembered promises, we need our political parties to commit to a pragmatic process of pruning and prioritisation in our education system.

INTRODUCTION

“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable... Our plans miscarry because we have no aim.” This quotation from Seneca’s letters speaks to the heart of the challenges faced by our education sector. Do we know what port our schools are aiming for or what winds will direct them there?

Put simply, this paper explores the question, “What is school for in Aotearoa New Zealand?” More precisely, it unpacks the differing and, at times, opposing views New Zealanders have to the variety of answers to this question. Is education a form of childcare? A pathway to future study or gainful employment? A means of securing equitable outcomes or civic engagement? Or is it some combination of these and other things?

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a definitive *answer* to this question but instead to highlight how the current system of education has failed to resolve its own internal conflicts in relation to it. We also want to emphasise the importance of clarifying our education priorities if we hope to improve education outcomes.

A poll we conducted as part of this research revealed that there was no broad public consensus regarding the purpose of school in New Zealand. Of the 1,000 people who responded with what, in their opinion, was the main reason for sending children to school:¹

- 34% said it was to teach them basic skills such as English and Maths
- 27% said it was for their personal development and socialisation
- 18% said it was to prepare them for work or university
- 12% said it was to make them engaged and responsible citizens
- 3% said it was to care for them while their parents are at work
- 6% said they were unsure

Opinions varied across demographics, with older people and those in rural communities more likely to emphasise basic skills and younger or urban demographics to emphasise personal development and socialisation. The framing of the question was intended to highlight the highest priority for education—its *main* purpose—and these results reveal a wide range of views that could pose a significant barrier to forming a consensus, or even reaching a majority view, on education.

Until recently, the Ministry of Education’s vision statement (the principles of which shaped the national strategy for schooling) stated that the purpose of school is to ensure that each New Zealander:²

- is strong in their national and cultural identity;
- aspires for themselves and their children to achieve more;
- has the choice and opportunity to be the best they can be;
- is an active participant and citizen in creating a strong civil society; and
- is productive, valued and competitive in the world.

This is a long list of ill-defined measures. Aspires to achieve more of what? Competitive in what context? The order of priority for each of these objectives is also not evident. Is it possible for schools to accomplish all of these things, equally, at the same time? If it is not possible, how should schools prioritise their time and

resources?

Despite the Ministry's own curriculum review material emphasising the necessity to articulate a vision before "developing and setting goals that describe what we need to do to get there,"³ in August 2023 the Ministry removed the above vision statement from their website without providing a replacement.

Given that this vision has driven the Ministry's strategy up until very recently, and given that no alternative vision is forthcoming at this time, we will use the Ministry of Education's vision statement as previously stated to frame our analysis and to unpack our principal question: "what is school for in Aotearoa New Zealand?" Using an historical lens, we will explore how the desire for these different outcomes arose, what legislation and reforms were put into place to attain them and the ways in which they interact with other objectives today. Each section will conclude with a breakdown of a specific conflict of purposes that has arisen out of this history.

OBJECTIVE 1:

"STRONG IN THEIR NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY"

One of the fundamental utilities of universal education is its capacity to instil a common national identity in an otherwise stratified society, whether that stratification be a result of religious, ethnic or class distinctions.⁴

The history of schooling in New Zealand begins as part of a broader global history of education movements in the 1800s. The 18th and 19th centuries were a time of great change and uncertainty for much of the world. The cultural impacts of colonisation on both the colonising nations (e.g. the shift in identity from nation to empire) and the colonised, increasing industrialisation and urbanisation across Europe, and the political and philosophical upheaval of the French and American revolutions of the late 1700s (both a symptom and a cause of change), led to a range of complex social and economic shifts for which universal education was to become the hoped-for panacea.⁵

The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, followed closely by Romanticism in the 19th century, had given rise to an emphasis on rationality and the primacy of the individual. There was a growing interest in how the human mind itself developed. Were we, as John Locke postulated, a "*tabula rasa*" (blank slate) upon which our experiences are written?⁶

In part in response to the works of philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who explored the theme of education in some of their key texts, and the work of later philosophers, e.g., Rousseau's *Emile: or on Education* (1762), and the spread of evangelical and humanist movements throughout Europe, the special status of "childhood" had been taken up by various religious and political figures.⁷ If children were truly a blank canvas, onto which the values and aims of society could be written, then the importance of education in forming not only intellectual capacity but also personality and character takes on new significance. As Lord Ashley stated in a UK parliamentary debate in 1840: "...the future hopes of a country must, under God, be laid in the character and condition of its children; however right it may be to attempt, it is almost fruitless to expect, the reformation of its adults; as the sapling has been bent, so will it grow... My grand object is to bring these children within the reach of education."⁸

For New Zealand and other colonial societies, the capacity for universal education to instil a shared language, value system, and national vision took on an even greater significance. For traditional landowners and newly

arrived migrants, shaping a common future was hindered by more than simple language barriers. Ideas about what the new nation should look like, how it should be structured and shared, and what vision of the future should be pursued were questions without obvious or commonly held answers. Initially, education was pursued through two streams of schooling in New Zealand, one for Māori communities and one for Pākehā children.

NATIVE SCHOOLS:

Missionaries established the first schools in New Zealand to teach local Māori communities. Instruction was in te reo Māori, and the focus was principally reading for the purpose of proselytisation. It was not long, however, before these institutions became the focus of national legislation and public funding. The Native Schools Acts of 1858 and 1867 were designed to provide basic skills to Māori students for assimilation into English society and industry or, as one parliamentarian put it, “to bring an uninitiated but intelligent and high spirited people into line with our civilisation.”⁹

Primary school became compulsory for Māori children in 1894. The main emphasis in native schools continued to be placed on the acquisition of English. This emphasis was at the behest of both policymakers and educators and many Māori parents and community members who wanted their children equipped for success in Pākehā society.¹⁰ Although they were permitted to attend public schools, most Māori children continued to attend native schools until the post-war period, when the Māori population became increasingly urbanised.¹¹ These schools were incorporated into the regional board system in 1969.

PĀKEHĀ SCHOOLS:

For Pākehā children, education became a focal point for the wider social concern of developing a national identity on a foundation of historic religious differences, particularly between Catholic and Protestant communities.¹² Developing a national curriculum to which parents would not conscientiously object was both paramount and complex.

The parliamentary debates in the lead-up to the Education Act 1877 focused on three essential criteria for universal education:¹³

- It must be free, such that there would be no financial barrier to participation;
- It must be compulsory, such that all parents would be compelled to make the effort to enrol their child in school; and
- It must be secular, such that parents with religious convictions would not be compelled to participate in an education system to which their consciences objected.

However, the question of how to create a secular education system that still afforded students the benefits of Christianity, both for its historical and cultural significance and the moral character that it bestows, was an issue of much debate in parliament during the 1800s. We will look into this in further detail in the section on citizenship and civil society.¹⁴

INTEGRATION:

In 1961 Jack Hunn, Acting Secretary of the Department of Māori Affairs, published a report into Crown-Māori relations. This shed light on the significant social disadvantages experienced by Māori communities, including the gap between academic outcomes for Māori and Pākehā students. Several recommendations were made to address these concerns, as a consequence of which Māori schools were integrated into the national system.¹⁵ This was the beginning of a steady stream of reforms aimed at improving academic outcomes for Māori children.

The combination of English medium education (with classes taught predominantly in English), a dwindling population and the rapid urbanisation of Māori communities in the 1900s had a strongly detrimental effect on the continuation of Māori culture and te reo Māori in particular. Although there was no official legislation banning its use, Māori children were discouraged from using te reo Māori in school to hasten assimilation.¹⁶ The closure of many of the native schools in 1956, against the wishes of many Māori communities, further hastened this decline. At the same time, from the middle of the 20th century, there was a growing concern amongst educators for the loss of te reo Māori, and some schools began to introduce Māori language and culture into their curricula.¹⁷

Findings of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1985 guaranteed the recognition and protection of te reo Māori. Māori medium education (where all or some of the subjects are taught in te reo Māori at least 51 per cent of the time) was recognised under the Education Reform Act, 1989. There was a growing belief that a national New Zealand identity was, in fact, a national Aotearoa New Zealand identity and that the Treaty of Waitangi required the protection of Māori culture and language and the fostering of a bicultural national identity.¹⁸

Efforts to ensure the protection and flourishing of Māori cultural identity in schools continue today. As of July 2022, three per cent of the total student population is enrolled in Māori medium education, and this number is growing.¹⁹ The current objectives for the Ministry of Education include a 2040 target for 150,000 Māori aged 15 and over to use te reo Māori at least as much as English and for one million New Zealanders to have basic fluency in Māori language by that time.²⁰

In 1996 there was a further refinement in education strategy on the basis of culture as the New Zealand government began to focus on the needs of Pasifika students who were consistently underachieving when compared with their Pākehā and Asian peers (data for other ethnic groups—African, Arabic, South American etc.—are not generally demarcated).²¹ In 2001, the first Pasifika Education Plan was developed. This was followed by the *Action Plan for Pasifika Education 2030 Vision*, which aspires to “ensure that the education sector will implement key system shifts to enable Pacific learners, their families, and communities to achieve their educational aspirations.”²²

New Zealand continues to struggle to address the gap in education outcomes between Pākehā and Asian, and Māori and Pasifika students.²³ The prominence of the *Ka Hikitia* (Māori education strategy) vision of Māori students “enjoying and achieving education success as Māori”²⁴ reflects the concern that a national education system, with a national curriculum and a homogenous pedagogy, pressures students to abandon culture in order to attain the benefits of school. Yet the concept of a single and overriding Māori identity is itself a form of homogenisation that may prove unhelpful for Māori students navigating their education opportunities. At the same time, developing a strong national identity continues to be a key objective for education. Are these two aims—fostering various cultural identities and instilling a unifying national character—mutually exclusive?

Conflict #1: National vs Cultural Identity

Is the purpose of school to equip children to participate in a national culture, whether that be Western, Māori or some combination of both, or is it to encourage their identification with and participation in their own cultural heritage—e.g. ethnic identity: Chinese, Pasifika, Scottish—religious identity—e.g. Islamic, Hindu, Christian? Do New Zealand schools have the resources to do both?

A briefing on education prepared for the incoming government in 1987 discussed the challenges associated with providing universal education within the context of “a dominant and several minority cultures.”²⁵ There is a concern “to prevent a Pākehā majority from gobbling up minorities.... The question that arises, therefore, is how to contain this tendency on the part of the majority and... give the other inhabitants of the country an opportunity to be themselves?”²⁶

The argument could be made that universal education is at odds with cultural identity if by cultural identity we mean a fixed instantiation of certain cultural characteristics—e.g. language, celebrations, costumes and artefacts. Learning to think and communicate in a second language, within the context of a foreign pedagogy and in the company of peers from a variety of cultural backgrounds can challenge preconceptions and lead to the reordering of priorities. Witnessing the ways that others choose to live, understanding what forms of success are valued amongst other people groups, can lead you to reflect on your own practices, and perhaps to choose a different path from what was previously available in the context of your cultural heritage.

The loss of certain cultural characteristics as a by-product of immigration is a well-researched phenomenon amongst diaspora in various countries around the world. “There is an extremely consistent international finding that migrant communities usually cease maintaining their heritage language within three generations, sometimes as soon as within two, at which point they shift completely to the majority language of their new country.”²⁷ This loss of language is linked with the loss of cultural heritage more broadly. At the same time, failure to assimilate linguistically and culturally to fit within the broader New Zealand context leads to poor economic outcomes and isolation.²⁸

Current immigration trends indicate that as many as one in four New Zealand learners will be from an ethnic minority by 2043—in the report cited, “ethnic learners” were students from Middle Eastern, Latin American, Continental European, Asian or African backgrounds. According to The Education Review Office, “Ethnicity is self-perceived, and people can belong to more than one ethnic group.” Determining one’s own cultural affiliation is a process of self-identification, not measured in terms of “race, ancestry, nationality, or citizenship.”²⁹ Given the multiplicity of ethnic identities that can arise under this definition—and the increasing interweaving of ethnic identities that will result from inter-cultural marriage—how can a universal education system hope to cater for the range of culturally specific demands? The report further states that:³⁰

Four in 10 whānau, and nearly a third of learners from ethnic communities, do not feel schoolwork is challenging enough. Almost two-thirds of whānau think schools should support their mother tongue, but there are 11 ethnic languages – including Hindi, which is the fourth most commonly spoken language in Aotearoa – which are not available as NCEA qualifications. Some whānau also want schools to teach more about religions.

Can the schools in our current public education system feasibly provide for this level of differentiation?

In order for a society to function, there needs to be a shared language and value system. Without these people cannot communicate with each other, cooperate meaningfully or contribute to civil society, and the rule of law cannot be upheld. From its inception, universal education has been intended to assist this process of homogenisation. Is it possible to develop and impart a national culture in schools without marginalising minorities or encouraging them to abandon some aspects of their heritage, or does focusing on one necessarily detract from the other? Is culture best imparted within the context of a schooling environment, or are there other community-based initiatives that are more effective? Can schools really contribute to the formation of New Zealanders who are strong in both their national *and* cultural identity?

OBJECTIVES 2 AND 3:

“ASPIRES FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN TO ACHIEVE MORE” AND “HAS THE CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY TO BE THE BEST THEY CAN BE”

These objectives are discussed together as they represent opposing approaches to education. To aspire for achievement is to understand an objective standard and encourage the child in question to attain *more* in relation to it. That is, to emphasise academic accomplishment as a chief aim of school. To provide choice and opportunity, with a particular emphasis on the individuation of those choices and opportunities (the “best *they* can be”) is to shape education around the needs, aims and interests of the individual learner. Do we fit the child to the standard, or the standard to the child?

When universal education was first introduced in New Zealand it was broadly understood that the pursuit of academia was not for everyone. The aims for education for both Māori and Pākehā children were largely utilitarian. As school inspector Henry Taylor, writing in 1862, commented, “I do not advocate for the Natives under present circumstances a refined education or high mental culture: it would be inconsistent, if we take into account the position they are likely to hold for many years to come in the social scale, and inappropriate, if we remember that they are better calculated by nature to get their living by manual rather than by mental labour.”³¹ Co-author of the 1877 bill, Charles Bowen, held a similar view of Pākehā children who showed a lack of academic promise:³²

It [the Education Act 1877] is not intended to encourage children whose vocation is that of honest labour to waste in the higher schools time which might be better devoted to learning a trade, when they have not got that special talent by which that higher education might be made immediately useful.

Though crudely expressed, these sentiments broadly describe an emphasis on academic attainment as the chief aim of school. Those students who, for whatever reason, were unable to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to pursue an higher education, were encouraged to seek opportunities elsewhere.

It was not long after the passing of the Education Act 1877, however, that the focus on education began to shift away from academic standards and towards individual learning. As early as 1899 George Hogben (in office 1899–1914) introduced a range of curriculum changes in his role as Inspector General of Schools and Secretary of Education. Following early writers on the development of intelligence and childhood such as Rousseau and Froebel (1782–1852), Hogben was concerned that “too much attention was given to cramming facts instead of developing the general intelligence of the child.”³³ He endeavoured to provide more freedom for teachers to create their own curricula based on their knowledge of the children in their care instead of working towards

standardised testing. He also advocated for experiential learning over the more traditional rote learning techniques of grammar and arithmetic:

*We must believe with Froebel and others of the most enlightened of the world's educators, that this child will learn best, not so much by reading about things in books as by doing; that is exercising his natural abilities by making things, by observing and testing things for himself; and then afterwards by reasoning about them and expressing his thoughts about them.*³⁴

Throughout the 1930s and 40s a great deal of education reform took place. The Atmore and Thomas reports (1930 and 1944 respectively) resulted in greater freedom for teachers “to organize their teaching in any way that most appeals to them.”³⁵

One of the principal movers behind these reforms was Clarence Beeby, Assistant Director of Education and then Director of Education (1939-1960). In 1939 he drafted the now famous Fraser-Beeby Statement (co-named for Peter Fraser, Minister of Education in the Labour government of the day) which stated that:³⁶

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that all persons, whatever their ability, rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, have a right as citizens to a free education of the kind for which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system.

For Beeby and Fraser, the answer to the question, “Who is school for?” was “Everyone!” In 1936 the proficiency exam for secondary school entry was abolished³⁷ and in 1944 secondary education became compulsory up to the age of 15.³⁸ A core curriculum was introduced at the same time, removing most of the distinctions between the various secondary education institutes.

The “reorientation of the education system” from an emphasis on national objectives for education (economy, morality, social cohesion) to the right of access for the individual led to significant changes in the scope, content and delivery of schooling. Since every child was now expected to carry on their studies to the secondary level, creating coherence between the primary to secondary curricula and closing the gap between technical and academic institutions, already begun with the Atmore report, gained even greater significance.³⁹ In order that students could have a better understanding of their academic potential, more advanced content was introduced into the primary school curriculum (e.g. languages).⁴⁰ Technical skills training was introduced into secondary schools—such that students did not have to choose immediately between a professional career or a trade.⁴¹ It could be argued, however, that rather than “reorienting” the education system, this series of reforms was simply an *expansion* of aims. The continual addition of objectives to the purpose of school may well account for much of the disorganisation and falling standards of the current education system.

National policy more broadly was taking a stronger interest in social welfare with the introduction of the “Cradle to Grave” reforms and tax-funded social security in 1938.⁴² School was increasingly seen as a means of providing for the needs of disadvantaged families. This, in combination with the influx of married women and mothers into the workforce as a result of labour shortages in the Second World War, led to the rise of pre-school and childcare facilities.⁴³ Increasingly, school was no longer merely a place to develop the basic building blocks of civic and economic engagement before entering a specialised field; it was increasingly the principal form of childcare, from infancy to working life.

The 1970s and 80s saw further polarisation of the public's views on the purposes of school and the efficiency of

the national system. A simplified representation of the opposing views can be expressed as a concern for “the continuing inequalities of education and the often less than beneficent role of the state” that saw knowledge-based education as one “in which schools maintained the dominance of particular forms and types of knowledge, and... the persistence of social and cultural inequalities in the wider society;”⁴⁴ at the same time there was a demand for “the assertion of standards, excellence, parental choice and productivity.”⁴⁵ The objective for parents to have more choice to ensure their children achieved more at school was considered to be in direct conflict with concerns for the opportunities and wellbeing of the most vulnerable students in particular.

The “myth” of the egalitarian nature of school, that had sustained public support for the education system over the decades preceding the 1970s, was coming to an end. In the words of prominent commentator of the day, Jack Shallcrass, “without such a myth to exert a ‘hold on the popular imagination... we will inevitably stagger on from one expedient to the next without direction or purpose’.”⁴⁶

The *Picot Report* and the resultant *Tomorrow’s Schools* reforms were the government’s response to the public’s flagging confidence. The Department of Education was replaced by a smaller Ministry of Education, and regional Education Boards were abolished, with authority reverting to individual schools.⁴⁷ It was hoped that these sweeping changes would accomplish the twin objectives of providing the flexibility for schools to respond to local needs whilst creating a competitive market approach that would ensure high standards and academic outcomes.⁴⁸ However, Jack Shallcrass’s concern that the education system would “stagger on from one expedient to the next” proved disconcertingly prophetic:⁴⁹

...zoning was abolished in 1991 but reinstated in 1998 and expanded in 2001; teacher registration was abolished in 1991 and reinstated in 1996; bulk funding, after a 10-year trial period, was removed from legislation in 2001; the Ministry of Education began as a hands-off, policy-only ministry in 1989 but this had changed by the mid-1990s...

In 2018, twenty years after *Tomorrow’s Schools* was introduced, a taskforce was set up to review the system. The purpose of the review was:⁵⁰

... to consider if the governance, management and administration of the schooling system is fit for purpose to ensure that every learner achieves educational success... [it focused] on the changes we need to make to governance, management and administration in education to ensure the fitness of the school system to meet the challenges we face, and to achieve equity and excellence.

The *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together* report recommended the reinstatement of school regions or “hubs” among several other changes.⁵¹ Achievement and individuation were presented as coexistent issues; however, I argue that the real issue was the incompatibility of these two aims. The pursuit of achievement necessitates a competitive system which further requires an objective standard that not all students can or want to achieve. To create a competitive system where more students achieve more is to accept that some students will achieve relatively less.

Government reforms of the education system have always been justified on the basis of academic outcomes. At the same time as larger reforms were taking place at the governance level, the process for assessing these outcomes was going through its own changes. In 2000 New Zealand became one of the first nations to participate in OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) testing. In 2007, National Standardised Testing was introduced “to improve student achievement by providing sound information about

how students are progressing.”⁵² However, this was repealed in 2017 when the “...international report showed that since National Standards were introduced in 2010 reading levels of New Zealand children have dropped to their lowest level on record.”⁵³ Instead, parents were to be provided with plain English reports that “...will relate to where their child is at, at a given point, and the progress shift that has occurred, rather than being judged against others.”⁵⁴

This shift in focus on assessment, from standards to individual attainment, is indicative of the wider philosophical shift from authority-imparted knowledge to “child-centred” teaching. The philosophy of child-centred learning, which is one of the hallmarks of the New Zealand curriculum today, first arrived in New Zealand in the 1930s.⁵⁵ This “constructivist teaching approach aims to provide students with experiences so they will construct knowledge themselves. Rather than acquiring knowledge directly from adults, children lead their own learning, and hopefully, ‘discover’ it unaided.”⁵⁶ Today, the New Zealand curriculum upholds this approach to teaching with an emphasis on five key competencies: managing self, participating and contributing, relating to others, thinking, and using language, texts and symbols—as opposed to the acquisition of a universal canon of knowledge.⁵⁷ Yet how can a child objectively evaluate their education interests or career choices if they are not exposed to a variety of subjects and equipped with the basic skills to engage with them?

Conflict #2: Universal vs Individual Education

Is the purpose of school to ensure that students have a shared canon of knowledge and skills for the purposes of civic and economic engagement, or is it to provide an environment in which children are free to explore their own interests?

In 1877, James Wallis MP raised the concern that universal education was itself at odds with creative, individual development:⁵⁸

After all other educational systems are swept away, then education will be left wholly in the hands of the State: the schoolmaster will be appointed by the State. The lessons prescribed by the State, the books to read fixed by the State — everything will be done by the State... the result will be a uniform monotonous system in which there will be no competition, and we shall be doing all we can to destroy the most important characteristic of our nature—individuality and variety of character.

The premise of a “universal” education is that there are certain skills and knowledge that children need, the attainment of which benefit all and contribute to a cohesive and flourishing society. A system of schooling founded on this logic is one that focuses on that which unites us: the skills and knowledge that we all need to acquire to participate in a shared social, economic and political system. It uses pedagogies based on general principles of cognitive development that outline what the average child is able to achieve by a given age. It tests children in relation to those expectations and encourages students to achieve the highest standard they can. In this context, the current New Zealand system of education, where students are divided up by age and are tested against a national curriculum, makes sense.

However, if the purpose of school is to provide an environment in which each child is supported to develop skills and knowledge experientially, in their own way and in their own time, a national system of universal education is of little value. Testing in this context makes very little sense at all, as all knowledge and skills are considered to be of equal worth. Some children will flourish in the classroom, and some will not; some children will relate well

to their peers, others will prefer the company of older or younger children, or no company at all. One teacher, catering for thirty students, cannot possibly hope to provide for such a range of needs and interests and will not have the breadth of knowledge necessary to assess student learning when there are no limits to what each child might pursue in their personalised curricula: "...because the NZC is agnostic about content, it propounds that all knowledge is equally valuable, that children's individual interests are more important than disciplinary structures and coherence."⁵⁹ Such a vision of school requires an entirely new conceptualisation of the methods and institutions of education. In light of this dichotomy, to continue to direct educators to free students from the oppression of knowledge whilst testing their skills and knowledge either against a national or an international standard is a special sort of madness.

OBJECTIVE 4:

"IS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT AND CITIZEN IN CREATING A STRONG CIVIL SOCIETY"

One of the original benefits attributed to universal education is its capacity to form the moral character of citizens upon which civil society rests. After all, as Mr John Hall MP argued: "[Education]... ought not to be a mere stuffing of the brain with secular information ... but it ought to be a cultivation of his heart and feelings, and instilling into him such moral and religious principles as will induce him to make good use of the knowledge with which we are supplying him."⁶⁰

As previously discussed in the section on national and cultural identity, the question of how to create a *secular* education system that encouraged the development of a student's moral character was an issue of much debate in the predominantly Christian context of New Zealand Parliament during the 1800s.

Not only was it considered impossible by many to teach morality without some reference to religion, but some felt it was impossible to teach anything at all without touching on theology. Particularly in subjects such as history, "... you cannot devise a system of education ... without including in it some theological opinion. In fact, you can scarcely open a book that will not contain passages tending to create a religious bias or to form a religious opinion."⁶¹

However, the overriding concern in parliament was that any form of religious teaching in schools, whether in public or denominational institutions, would lead to social disharmony, and politicians were urged to "... let all unite with a view to bringing children together into one common system of secular education, such as should teach them the knowledge of laws of their country and the duty they owed to it." The resolution was to remove religious subject matter from the curriculum altogether, but this was considered a regrettable necessity.⁶²

I think that is a matter greatly to be regretted. What we have to do, in view of the work that is before us, is to accept facts and deal with them as best we can, hoping that a day will come when dissensions of creed and differences of opinion upon doctrinal points will no longer be permitted to trammel the efforts of the people to educate all children on a broad and national basis.

There was, however, a loophole in the law that allowed school buildings to be used by religious institutions outside of school hours, thus providing the opportunity for religious instruction.⁶³ Despite the removal of religious content from public education, many schools continued to provide some form of religious instruction outside of the compulsory four-hour school day and "moral education" continued to be included as part of the core national curriculum.⁶⁴ However, the long-awaited day when "dissensions of creed and differences of

opinion” no longer “trammel the efforts... to educate all children on a broad and national basis” is still not on the horizon for New Zealand, as we shall see.

An emphasis on the importance of a sense of national and civic duty was further enshrined under Hogben. He was particularly concerned for the moral and physical well-being of children and the role schools could play in preparing dutiful citizens. Though the requirement for secular education barred any religious teaching as the basis for a moral framework, Hogben was “mildly critical of the secular clause and argued that there was a difference between the religious and moral effects of the Bible.”⁶⁵ However, when it came to writing the syllabus in 1904, he was obliged to be satisfied that the requirement for moral instruction in the Education Act 1877 could be met by the example of hardworking and virtuous teachers that students could emulate.⁶⁶ This position on moral education in New Zealand remained relatively unchanged until after the Second World War.

The introduction of military drills, lessons on the laws of health and health inspections, and instruction in morality and the duties of the citizen into the 1914 school curriculum was seen as crucial to preparing for the defence of the nation.⁶⁷ The First and Second World Wars further emphasised the importance of preparing dutiful citizens.

Debates around moral and religious education continued to arise in the post-war period. However, the Education Department continued to err on the side of secular. In 1962, “a major Commission on Education concluded that the schools’ task was primarily intellectual.” It did not deny the importance of morality, but it determined that “... the primary source of these traits lies outside the school while in the sphere of intellectual development the school, though it is not alone, is pre-eminent.”⁶⁸

The 1970s saw a renewed focus on moral education (now referred to as values education). This was felt to be largely due to three phenomena: concerns regarding youth crime and delinquency, the introduction of non-exam subjects in high schools such as “design for living,” which included discussions on moral issues and decision-making, and a rising interest in values education in academia.⁶⁹ Although “[m]ost felt that the schools had a role to play... there was no consensus on how this should be done.”⁷⁰ The issue of moral education was vexed further in 1972 when the Department of Education took steps to regularise the teaching of sex education in secondary schools.⁷¹ The social norms and values necessarily transmitted through such an area of study were particularly a source of concern for religious communities. This continues to be the focus of much debate today. The response of the Department of Education to the demand for moral education of some form or another resulted in the directive for teachers to focus on assisting students in “[d]eveloping the ability to discuss and accept the existence of alternative points of view on moral issues, learning to apply the criterion of rationality to moral judgments, and learning to follow through the consequences and obligations arising from moral decisions.”⁷²

In 1977 *The Johnson Report* (The Committee on Health and Social Education, 1977) further emphasised the importance of values and morality in education and recommended several reforms, including: the return to and reinforcement of basic universal values; the appointment of values education coordinators who could facilitate discussion of controversial issues in schools; and the introduction of a spiritual dimension to education that would allow students to explore metaphysical questions such as “who am I?” and “why am I here?”⁷³ “The proposals were strongly opposed by many (but not all) churches, by business people (such as the Employers’ Federation) and by groups (like the Concerned Parents Association) which claimed to speak for parents...” and were not taken up as a result.⁷⁴

However, in 1978 and 1985, some elements of values education were introduced into the social studies and health education syllabi, respectively. These largely focused on “values clarification”—exploring values and moral reasoning through activities and discussions, directed largely by the interests of the student group.⁷⁵ Until the late 1980s, it was felt that this was sufficient as “some values are clearly understood and can provide a base for curriculum planning” whilst others “are more controversial and need careful consideration.”⁷⁶

In the 1990s, a further resurgence of moral education took place, this time as “a response to the more individualistic, materialistic approach to life in the 1980s, a need to understand a wider range of the cultural values of New Zealanders, a need to understand the cultural values of those nations with whom they have political and economic relationships and an awareness of the values issues raised by the increasingly global nature of society.”⁷⁷ In 1998, the UNESCO Summit on Values in Education was held in Wellington, and several attempts were made to reinvigorate values in schools through the early 2000s through such initiatives as the Living Values project and changes to the New Zealand curriculum.⁷⁸ The focus, however, has remained on “values exploration” rather than values inculcation. This “is not a context for the formal teaching of a set of values,” instead, “the Values Exploration process enables students to develop skills to identify, examine, clarify and explore their own and others’ values positions in relation to an issue or set of circumstances.”⁷⁹

The new curriculum—to be implemented in 2027—intends that:⁸⁰

Students learn to contribute, participate, and take positive action as informed, ethical, and empathetic citizens with a concern for the wellbeing of communities and a commitment to a fair society for all.

But how is this to be accomplished? What does “fair” mean, and what ethical framework should students use to inform their “positive action?”

The main curriculum focus for values still resides in social studies and health and physical education. However, unlike the sex education curriculum of the 1970s, the New Zealand Curriculum now advocates sexuality education, which it defines as “a holistic approach to relationships and sexuality education as defined by the hauora model which includes physical, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects... [it] is much broader than sex education, which only relates to the physical aspects of sexual and reproductive knowledge.”⁸¹

The reference to “hauora” here—a uniquely Māori philosophy of health incorporating physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing—is part of a larger movement to incorporate principles of *tikanga* (Māori customs) and *mātauranga* (Māori wisdom) into the New Zealand curriculum including in the areas of science, history and mathematics. This has been a source of concern for educators and communities awaiting further details (the curriculum is yet to be officially released), particularly regarding the capacity of non-Māori teachers to impart these values effectively and accurately in an English-medium context.⁸² Given the stated “spiritual” aspects of this content, can the curriculum still claim to be secular?

Teachers of Pasifika students are also required to develop competencies in *Tapasā*—a Pacific learner lens—which encourages teachers to “identify Pacific values and to incorporate them into all [their] teaching and learning practices.”⁸³ Do teachers have the necessary time and resources to differentiate content according to the cultural values of individual students? Should the values of some cultures take precedence over others?

Conflict #3: Moral vs Secular

Is school character or knowledge building? What is the greater priority: moral or intellectual formation? Can you achieve both in the context of universal education.

In its almost 150-year history, the New Zealand education system has grappled with questions of morality—what values it should be imparting to students to ensure the thriving of civil society and how it should go about forming students’ civic instinct in the context of a pluralistic society. According to the Department of Education’s reading of the past:⁸⁴

In 1904, the ‘moral instruction’ section of the syllabus for schools highlighted such values as modesty, prudence, patriotism, zeal and integrity of purpose. ‘Character training’ in the 1928 syllabus emphasised obedience, honesty, care of public property, politeness and the dignity of labour. In 1961, it was hoped that children would be tolerant, kindly, just, generous and independent.... In 1978, the wish was expressed that, as they move through their social studies programmes, children will be encouraged to become open-minded, to have concern for truth and justice and to develop those feelings of empathy and humanity which will help them grow towards responsible participation in society.

Today, the New Zealand Curriculum enshrines excellence, innovation, inquiry and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability and integrity. It is the Ministry of Education’s view that these values “enjoy widespread support because it is by holding these values and acting on them that we are able to live together and thrive.”⁸⁵ However, even these so-called “secular values” are not without their ideological underpinnings and, therefore, are not above being questioned by some members of the public.

Teaching social values today, such as sexual and gender diversity, is considered crucial to ensuring the moral formation of members of New Zealand society. However, some parents see these aspects of the curriculum (particularly those that conflict with religious teaching) as a significant barrier to accessing free and *secular* education.

OBJECTIVE 5:

IS PRODUCTIVE, VALUED AND COMPETITIVE IN THE WORLD

As previously discussed in the section on Aspiration and Opportunity, in the early days of New Zealand’s universal education, secondary education was reserved for those students who displayed academic prowess and intended to gain entry to the universities. By the 1930s, however, the link between school achievement and better employment opportunities had been firmly established. Growing numbers of students were choosing to carry on their education into secondary school without any intention of attending university.⁸⁶ Employers were likewise seeking workers with the additional qualification of a high-school certificate. The focus of secondary schooling—which until this time centred on preparation for university entrance exams—moved to a broader objective of preparing students for professional/technical employment.

With the advent of compulsory high school education in 1944, post-school career pathways became more central to the core purpose of education providers. This required the dissolution of the demarcation between academic and vocational curricula and the expansion of subject offerings. Some technical and specialist

secondary institutes, rather than aligning themselves with the new, broader, curriculum, began to reposition themselves as tertiary education providers.

The Fraser-Beeby vision of school for “all persons, whatever their ability” spoke to a more humanist perspective on education as a right, not a utility, a sentiment broadly supported by the New Zealand public. This further led to New Zealand’s adoption of the UNESCO vision for Lifelong Learning, and in the 1970s, New Zealand expanded free education to the tertiary level. “The decades of post-World War II economic growth and prosperity, the full employment of adult males and the greater participation of women in social and cultural activities prompted the claim that the “learning society” had emerged in New Zealand.”⁸⁷

However, this vision was short-lived. Throughout the 1970s, economic growth in New Zealand stalled, and by the 1980s, considerable economic reforms were being enacted at the national level. The education sector was incorporated into this broader strategy.⁸⁸

The increasing influence of globalisation and technological development in the 1980s and ‘90s gave rise to New Zealand’s ambition to become a “knowledge economy,” “one in which the generation and use of knowledge is the predominant force in wealth generation and comparative national advantage.”⁸⁹ This strategy necessitated both the rapid and widespread uptake of tertiary qualifications and the continued high performance of New Zealand students in international testing. It also led to New Zealand schooling itself being seen as an exportable commodity, with international education pre-COVID contributing \$3.7 billion to our GDP in 2019.⁹⁰

Each of these factors have impacted on the delivery of schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand. The New Zealand curriculum has increasingly morphed to adopt aspirations for “future-focused” education.⁹¹ This principally required the jettisoning of a “knowledge-focused” approach to learning to make way for crucial competencies.⁹² Thus, a review of the science curriculum in 2002 concluded that “content currently taught in science encapsulated ‘old’ knowledge, not likely to be relevant or valued in the future ‘knowledge society.’”⁹³ In 2004, the Curriculum Manager, Mary Chamberlain, stated that “it’s no longer possible to teach children everything they need for a lifetime because knowledge is growing too fast and our lives are too long. Knowing how to learn and knowing how to apply what is learned are critical.”⁹⁴ Current amendments to the curriculum are in keeping with this trend. It “encourages students to look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship, enterprise, and globalisation.”⁹⁵

Conflict #4: Local vs Global

Is the purpose of school to prepare students to be productive, valued and competitive in the world or to be productive and valued in the New Zealand economy? Is economic productivity the chief aim of school?

The New Zealand change in focus from knowledge acquired to a knowledge economy has led to an emphasis on core competencies at the expense of essential skills and a canon of shared information. As of 2018, the ERO has supported a 3.0 approach to learning:⁹⁶

While traditional education systems fostered the obedience demanded of the manufacturing workforce, the Education 3.0 system must nurture creative and collaborative skills. Knowledge is available at the click of a mouse, but learning to apply it requires a teacher who can instruct, facilitate, guide, and support as needed.

Can students learn to apply knowledge if they do not first acquire it? Is the 3.0 approach to learning preparing

students for engagement in the New Zealand economy in its current form?

A 2020 report by the New Zealand Productivity Commission highlighted that “declining achievement in the core skills areas of reading, mathematics and science over the last decade”⁹⁷ was a significant challenge to the future of employment within New Zealand. In the 2023 Skills Shortage Survey, conducted by the Employers and Managers Association, only 12 per cent of businesses did not currently have vacancies and 90 per cent of businesses with vacancies were struggling to fill roles, many citing a skills shortage as the central issue. Companies across all industries reported a dependence on immigration to fill labour shortfalls.⁹⁸

According to the most recent New Zealand Government report available on Knowledge Intensive Services, towards which the 3.0 competencies are directed, only 19 per cent of New Zealanders were employed in this sector in 2014.⁹⁹ With 232,496 employees in 2023, Manufacturing is still one of the largest single industries in New Zealand, second only to Healthcare and Social Assistance, with 260,287 employees.¹⁰⁰ Yet, “A ‘well-lit’ pathway towards university study... means that vocational pathways receive less attention, respect and resources.”¹⁰¹

The increased specialisation of high-school subjects (today there are 67 subjects on the NCEA list) in accordance with the traditional view “that subject choices at school directly map onto careers”¹⁰² leads students to feel locked into a trajectory before they feel ready to make significant decisions about their future. Students also feel pressured to spend longer in the education system in order to ensure that they secure “good” jobs. If school is directing students towards the knowledge economy, and the knowledge economy is only employing 19 per cent of New Zealanders, two questions arise. Is the relatively low engagement of New Zealanders in the knowledge economy indicative that students are not being adequately equipped to engage in this sector, or are there only limited opportunities for New Zealanders to engage in the knowledge economy, and are students not being prepared for the jobs that are actually available to them in the near future?

Given the limited resources of both time and finances, should school in New Zealand form part of the government’s strategy for global competition in the knowledge economy, or should it focus on preparing New Zealanders for jobs in the more traditional sectors at home?

A small number of New Zealanders (three per cent) are of the view school performs a different role in the economy. It is their impression that school is an essential childcare service that enables parents to engage in full-time employment. Are they alone in this view? In a 1987 brief to the incoming government, the list of purposes for school included “safe custody of children.” The custodial role of schools can be dated back to the late 1800s when industrial schools were established for “neglected and criminal children.” The influx of women into the workforce during and after the Second World War further shifted the burden of childcare away from families and predominantly towards school institutions.

It has also altered the perception of time spent at school. If school is a form of childcare, then the period of time a child is required to spend in school is no longer based on outcomes but the age at which society deems a child to become an adult. It could be argued that the amount of time students spend in the education system has become a key standard instead of the amount accomplished in that time. We are no longer focusing on what a student achieves but rather on how well the system responds to their needs while they are there. As “custodians” of children, schools are struggling to address the growing mental and physical well-being challenges of students, which increasingly fall under their purview. There is the potential for this economic and social role of schooling to detract from—even to overwhelm—the capacity for schools to cater for the personal

and academic development of students.

CONCLUSION

What is the purpose of school? As our polling results show, the New Zealand public do not have a unified answer to this question. An investigation of the Ministry of Education's vision statement reveals a series of unaligned and sometimes contradictory objectives. Rather than the "reorientation of the education system" called for by Beeby and Fraser in 1939, the education system has expanded to integrate a growing list of desired outcomes and values. The school curriculum is now a Frankenstein's monster of historical and contemporary objectives and pedagogies that create confusion and inefficiency.

Any prioritisation of the core purposes of school represents, at the very least, an opportunity cost. Pursuing some objective means you can't pursue others; pursuing several means, you pursue each less effectively. The more time and money we spend, for example, teaching Tikanga, the less time and money there is available to direct towards Tapasā, or towards STEM subjects.

How can the vast leviathan of the education sector hope to accomplish *all* of these proposed aims? With no clear indication of priority or pedagogy we cannot even effectively measure outcomes. With the 2023 election on the horizon, the trials and tribulations of the New Zealand school system are coming under increasing scrutiny. Any envisaged education system that is not established on the bedrock of an answer to the question "what is school for in Aotearoa New Zealand?" is not going to be coherent or efficient and "will inevitably [continue to] stagger on from one expedient to the next without direction or purpose."¹⁰³

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