

The role of unions in shaping government policy towards the Beeby/Fraser ideal

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“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.” (Rewritten to be gender neutral.)

I should declare my possible biases on this topic: I was a PPTA activist at branch, regional and national levels from beginning teaching in 1971. In 2002, I moved from teaching to becoming a member of PPTA’s Policy and Advocacy team at National Office, with responsibility for a range of professional areas. Since my “retirement” in May 2018, I have had contracts with the Ministry of Education (for the NCEA Review) and PPTA (for the Principals’ Staffing Summit and currently to write a history of PPTA-Te Wehengarua from 2002-2023).

In this paper, while the title talks of “unions”, I am confining myself largely to PPTA because that is what I know about. While the three teacher unions (PPTA, NZEI and TEU) work together from time to time, there are many differences in their histories and ways of operating.

What were Beeby and Fraser thinking?

Professor John O’Neill, in his provocation, breaks down the Beeby/Fraser statement as requiring state education that is “free at the point of use”, common for all children and young people, and solely state-provided.

There is a real question in my mind about what Beeby and Fraser meant by the words *“a free education of the kind for which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers”*. Is John’s interpretation as “a common state education for all children and young people” right? Steve Maharey provided a different interpretation, at a seminar in 2003, as:

Beeby's vision formally commits the state to enabling every child, each citizen, to reach their potential. Stated simply, it was about, as he put it, "making the education system responsive to the needs of the individual kid". (Maharey 2003)

This interpretation implies that the state must provide equitably, which means that different students will receive more or different inputs in order to produce equal outcomes. But did they really envisage at the time how far this would need to go? For example, in their use of the words “reorientation of the education system”, did

they envisage that in the future we might have networks of schools where the language of instruction was Māori, not English?

The responsiveness they talked of became, in Maharey's mind during his brief term as Minister of Education between 2005 and 2007, a concept he called "personalisation of learning", an idea that seemed to produce little more in his time than a glitzy launch and some glossy fliers. But is that actually what was in their minds?

Nevertheless, I believe that most teachers today understand that students have widely varying needs, and some of them require more or different help to be able to reach their potential. The profession's collective understanding of the Beeby/Fraser dictum has evolved over the years, and continues to evolve, and as long as we interpret it as being about equity, it will continue to serve its purpose as an assertion of the ideal.

On the other hand, governments come and go, and their education goals are not always about equity, but may be about balancing the books, enabling the private sector to make money out of education, fostering competition between schools and students as, supposedly, a way of encouraging excellence – readers could no doubt add to this list!

What are the unions' goals?

The policy goals of PPTA Te Wehengarua have always been about fairness: to teachers, to schools, and to students. It is my impression that NZEI shares those goals, although I couldn't find their constitution to check whether it was in their Objects. In this paper, I provide some examples of areas where PPTA's understanding and implementation of equity has developed over the years.

Example 1: Equity in relation to Māori students

Over the period since the ground-breaking Waahi Hui in 1984, PPTA developed policies about education for Māori students, but has also followed a lengthy process of modifying its own structure to reflect partnership with Māori at every level, of which the most recent change is the introduction of a Māori Vice-President position.

One area of struggle for equity of outcomes was in student qualifications, with grumblings in the 1970's becoming full-blown debate about the merits of standards-based assessment versus norm-referenced assessment. PPTA argued that the scaling processes for School Certificate disadvantaged many students, and

results for Te Reo Māori as a subject suffered extreme scaling. In the late 1980's, teachers began experimenting with versions of standards-based assessment as a way of eliminating statistical scaling and the inequities that it caused. Eventually, after another decade of conflict, the NCEA, roughly as we know it today, emerged for use in 2002, with qualified support from PPTA.

However, a qualification system is simply an artefact of government policy-making and it can be altered over time as governments change. A classic example of this was the target set by National Party Minister Hekia Parata between 2014 and 2017. This target demanded that schools ensure that 85% of students achieve Level 2 NCEA. Ostensibly, this targeting was to remedy the inequities between Māori and other students by holding schools responsible for 85% of all students and of subgroups of students achieving Level 2.

However, when ministers demand policies, and don't listen to the possible negative consequences, disaster can strike. Measuring the effectiveness of schools by whether they achieved this 85% target drove them to achieve it by whatever means necessary, even if they actually disadvantaged some students further (consciously or unconsciously). The NCEA as structured at the time left too many choices, so schools could encourage students into easy courses rather than ones that pushed them to higher achievement; they could assess students against standards they could easily achieve rather than ones that stretched them; they could enter students in more standards than sensible, hoping that they would succeed in some; they could run "top-up" programmes for students to pick up a few missing credits on anything that fitted the bill. We would all wish schools to have high expectations for all their students and work to stretch them to reach their potential, but the 85% target caused the opposite behaviour, despite its ostensible goals. PPTA reminded the government and the public of this problem repeatedly, but it was not really addressed until the National-led government was defeated in 2017.

Much of the impetus for the current review of NCEA was because of the rorts that had been driven by the 85% target. The new government wanted quality of learning over quantity and understood that targets don't fit standards-based assessment systems.

Example 2: Opposing school choice policies

Policies of school choice, taken to their ultimate in the 1990's but still very evident in middle-class values today, mitigate against achievement of the Beeby/Fraser ideal. PPTA has a strong record of fighting against school choice policies such as funding of private schools, creating charter schools, integrating schools into the state

system but allowing them to behave like private schools, allowing schools to design their own zones to enrol the students that are easier to teach.

The struggle against charter schools came down in the end to three areas: South and West Auckland, and Whangarei. The Authorisation Board declared an interest in having at least one charter school in post-earthquake Christchurch East, but to the delight of local PPTA members, no group or company showed any interest in moving into that already traumatised area. But the fight in Whangarei was fraught, and one of the two secondary charters, in Whangaruru, was so dysfunctional it eventually had to be ordered to close. In the meantime, the education of a group of students was seriously harmed.

Example 3: Union structural change

Since the Waahi hui in 1984, PPTA has been engaged in an almost continuous process of structural change towards a Tiriti relationship between Māori and Tauwiwi members. That year, the first Kaumātua was appointed. In 1987, commitment to the Tiriti was built into the union's rules, and the first Āpiha Māori (Advisory Officer Māori) was appointed. In 1988 a Māori members' roll was initiated, Te Huarahi Māori Motuhake was officially recognised as having the role to advise Executive on ngā take Māori, a network of Māori regional coordinators and the position of Whaea were created.

In the 1990's a partnership committee, Te Rōpu Whakapūmau, began along with an agreed conflict resolution process, Te Totara Wahi Rua. (This later became Te Rōpu Matua.) Māori Teachers' Conferences began and became annual from 2000. The union was given its Māori name, Te Wehengarua, in 1995.

But the biggest challenge to the union was a Treaty Audit by Moana Jackson, *He Huarahi Hou*, published in 2000. While his recommendations have not all been implemented over the 20 years since, and some of them were highly controversial at the time, it set the scene for further significant changes. These included regular Tiriti education for the Executive, increased Māori representation at Annual Conference, the creation of the role of Te Mataroa (a wide-ranging Field Service-based role), continuing education of members in PPTA Kawa and Tikanga, acquisition of a presidential Korowai and protocols around its use, a ceremonial waka to be a visible symbol of the Mauri of PPTA Te Wehengarua, and finally in 2021 a Māori Vice-President role, elected by Māori members.

All of these changes can be seen as part of the union's commitment to equity for its Māori members.

Example 4: Fighting for better staffing provision

PPTA's struggles over many years to address teacher work overload in its various forms have always been about teachers wanting to be able to do their best work for all of their students and recognising that those whose needs are greatest will suffer the most if classes are too large, teachers lack time for preparation, feedback, contact with families/whanau and planning differentiated programmes with colleagues. PPTA says "teachers working conditions are students' learning conditions", and these are not empty words.

Significant improvements have been made over the years, with all teachers having a basic five hours of non-contact a week and people with extra responsibilities additional hours; a maximum average class size of 26 across a teacher's load and compensatory mechanisms if that can't be met; increased understandings that schools need to control the number of after-school meetings; restrictions on the number of days teachers can be called back in their 'holidays', and so on. However the struggle continues.

Example 5: Advocating for better provision for students with greater needs

PPTA's policy on alternative education is for students who end up in activity centres or other alternative programmes to have the best possible teaching, not an absence of qualified teachers at all. A conference paper in 2006 contained the words:

Students whose behaviour is disruptive are troubled students; they have emotional, social and learning needs that are greater than the average student. In the same way that no-one today would support intellectually or physically disabled students being educated by non-teachers, neither should we accept the education of disruptive students being in the hands of non-teachers. (PPTA, 2006).

My passion on that subject was driven by having taught in, then run, an activity centre in Papakura in pre-Tomorrow Schools days, when they were properly funded, resourced with trained and qualified teachers suitable for the context, looked after by the local Education Board, and the only form of alternative education available for students with behavioural issues. There weren't nearly enough of them though, and in Papakura alone, we could have filled a second centre with kids who had been kicked out of schools, often informally, and given nowhere to go to continue their learning. Today, seriously disruptive students are largely in programmes that are so poorly funded they can't afford to hire qualified teachers, and all they have is a teacher from a local school who pops in occasionally to provide "educational leadership". No new activity centres have been created since ours fought for proper

resourcing when the Tomorrow's Schools machine rolled over us. (A story for another day.)

Conclusions

The challenges for secondary schools have changed hugely since the 1940's as well. In the interviews I did for my PhD with teachers who had been in the profession for a long time, I was really surprised that not one of them spontaneously gave the changing characteristics of the school population as a reason for the push to change the qualifications system. Over the period covered, the proportion of students staying on to the end of Year 13 had increased significantly, as a result of (a) an increase in the leaving age, (b) workforce changes that reduced the demand for unskilled labour, and (c) a qualifications spiral. Schools are now expected to keep most of their students at least to the end of Year 12, and that means, for equity to be achieved, providing programmes that will keep them engaged and give them access to worthwhile qualifications.

This paper has only touched on the ways that PPTA has worked towards the Beeby/Fraser ideal over its history as a union. I like Mark Potter's title, 'Still waiting for Beeby', but I think it's a bit passive. I think the teacher unions have not sat around and waited to achieve equity in education, I think they have fought for it, hard and long. But I agree with his implication that we have not got there yet.

References

Maharey, Steve (2003). *The Beeby Vision Today*. Speech 13 July 2003.
<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/beeby-vision-today>

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