

The Beeby/Fraser ideal: Is it time to abandon it?

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Provocation

Should state education be free at the point of use? Should it be a common state education for all children and young people? And should it be provided solely by the state? In the decades following the Great Depression and the Second World War, as our modern welfare state emerged the answer to all these questions seemed to be an unambiguous 'Yes'.

Over the last thirty-five years, views have changed. We have a workfare not a welfare state. Government now provides a partial subsidy towards the cost of early learning, schooling and post compulsory education while the proportion of user pays charges increases year by year. The politics of race, culture and faith demand highly differentiated approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Devolved governance, decision rights, and fundraising imperatives have led to a constant questioning of the authority of the state.

In this seminar, we revisit the famous Beeby-Fraser statement and ask whether it can still serve as an aspirational and inspirational call to action. If not, with what shall we replace it?

Elaboration

Four years ago, the final report of the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together: Whiria Ngā Kura Tūātitini*, made only one reference to the famous Beeby-Fraser statement and that to the need to reorient the system as a whole.

The report called for the schooling system to pivot and be founded on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the three international rights declarations that we have signed since 1989: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, The United Nations Declaration on the Rights

of Indigenous Peoples, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Such a pivot would be transformative for children and their education. The report suggested that it would take five to ten years to gain momentum and reorient the system in this way.

However, we were also pragmatic in our report. We noted the absence of trust and mutual understanding in the schooling system we reviewed; the fact that without a middle layer it was unnecessarily difficult to promote and disseminate good practice; that the short electoral cycle made education policy vulnerable and prone to frequent chop and change; and that too many policy initiatives were attempted at the one time. The schooling system was not a learning system in effect.

Four years after the Taskforce report, what evidence is there of progress? Is it fairer? Are we building capability and capacity? Do we trust each other any better? And do learners and whānau have any greater decision rights? More broadly, do those families, communities and groups in society who have benefited hugely from the Tomorrow's Schools reforms accept that to build a more equitable system for all, they have to give up some of their unearned and unintended advantages?

Thirty years or so after he gave up the Director of Education position, Beeby (Beeby, 1992) observed that the central question about education was not equality of opportunity or equality of results but about the appropriate balance between the rights claims of the individual and the rights claims of the community.

Today, we have the benefit of another thirty years' hindsight to aid our assessment of how fair, equitable and just our schooling system really is. From my perspective it seems that both the main political parties see the way forward (albeit in different proportions) as a continuation of the existing mix of New Public Management accountabilities and quasi-managed local schooling marketplaces. The problem with this is that without the necessary trust, co-operation and understanding of each's contribution to the whole, nothing much can or will change for the better.

According to Michael Couch (Couch, 2017), with hindsight we can see that there was a basic flaw with Beeby's abstract myth, namely that it enabled governments to make promises without having to commit to equity in any meaningful way, and also to enact reforms that work against equity.

In part, this flaw is what Nancy Fraser refers to as the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma' in pursuit of justice (Fraser, 2008). Fraser suggests (p. 34) that for the most part, as a society we have opted for the safety of affirming marginalised cultural groups rather than the uncertainty and destabilisation that radical economic redistribution and system transformation require. It seems to me that this is precisely the danger we find ourselves in following the review of Tomorrow's Schools: that we simply affirm surface reallocations of existing goods, and accord surface allocations of respect to those groups that do not enjoy parity of esteem or equal moral worth.

Conclusion

We know what is required to remove structural and institutional obstacles to overcoming existing injustices in education. However, how can we persuade the most advantaged groups and communities in society to give up their individual privileges in order to advance broader and deeper community justice? And for this, is the Fraser-Beeby ideal more help or hindrance?

References

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