

International Round-up

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I am Michael Gaffney a lecturer at the College of Education at the University of Otago in Ōtepoti/Dunedin. I have had the good fortune to stay in one location for my career and change the jobs over time. After gaining a qualification in primary teaching, I began working in the area of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) just as it was emerging as a generic tool in education. I then moved to the Children's Issues Centre for 15 years, where I got to work on quite diverse research projects by joining different multidisciplinary teams. The next move was to work independently for 5 years undertaking evaluation projects, mainly for social services, before joining the early childhood initial teacher education team at the College of Education.

The projects, while diverse, coalesce around sociocultural theory, the sociology of childhood and child rights, which in New Zealand was initially articulated by the former director of the Children's Issues Centre, the late Professor Anne B Smith (Smith, 2013, 2016; Dalli & Meade, 2016). These theoretical approaches have let me consider the school experiences of disabled students, young people's views on youth participation, family support in early childhood education, and the provision of social services to children, young people and their families. I now bring these ideas into teaching where I introduce early childhood students to inclusive practices and supervise postgraduate students in methods that often involve ethnography, interview studies or action research.

Woven through many of these topics is an interest in education policy. In 2017 New Zealand had a change in government after 9 years with a right leaning coalition that took over at the time of the global financial crisis. The expectations were high for a left leaning coalition to redress what was seen as a lack of funding and leadership with respect to health, education and social spending. We are now starting to see a shift in relation to education, especially schooling and early childhood education (May, 2019).

My own interest in education policy began with reforms called Tomorrow's Schools that occurred in the late 1980s and led to the Education Act (1989). New Zealand academics (Thrupp et al., 2020; Wylie et al., 2016) still look back to that time as a major shift in education for New Zealand to the point where the most recent round of policy consultation is called the Tomorrow's Schools Review (Ministry of Education, 2019a). Through 2018 and 2019 the Ministry of Education was involved in a work plan that was so complex that it has taken most of the full term of the government to decide what to do with respect to changes in early childhood education, schooling and vocational learning. The plan is split into four Big Reviews, namely Tomorrow's Schools, school property, national examinations and vocational education; seven medium-term strategies; and seven key initiatives.

The task force groups set up to review the different areas of education included academics, many of whom had been present when the first round of reviews happened in the 1980s. They would note significant changes in that time, including a much higher profile for indigenous learners (Barr & Seals, 2018), Children's Rights (Gaches & Gaffney, 2019) and environmental sustainability (Ritchie, 2017). However, all of these people would say there is more to be done with respect to each topic. These themes are not restricted to education, but are apparent across many other sectors as well. Children in state care have seen a significant shift in how they are to be supported. Coincidentally, the Act of Parliament that directs this work, originally the Child, Young Persons and their Families Act dated 1989 (now called the Oranga Tamariki Act), came into force the same year as the current Education Act.

In the meantime, an election has been called for September of this year, which will only allow some of the work identified through the education consultation and revision process to be initiated (Ministry of Education, n.d.). The policy expectations around early childhood education are 'higher' because of the first Early Childhood Education (ECE) Strategic Plan (Ministry of Education, 2002) presented nearly 20 years earlier by a previous Labour-led coalition government that set out quite explicit goals across a 10-year time frame. People were acutely aware that only 6 years of the plan were implemented before there was a change in government, and as a result, there was unfinished business (Mitchell, 2019). Despite these expectations, the government did not set dates for achieving each identified goal and instead used the terms short, medium and long term within the Draft Early Learning Strategy. After consultation, the Strategy has been relabelled the *Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029* (Ministry of Education, 2019b) and it includes a proviso that 'implementation will be contingent on Cabinet agreement to individual actions and future budget processes' (p. 14).

The notion of fiscal responsibility has been embedded within New Zealand's neoliberal legislation – the Public Finance Act 1989 and the State Sector Act 1988 – for over 30 years. Each government seeks to find new ways to demonstrate to the public their ability to show fiscal responsibility and leadership. This means that they cannot make unlimited spending promises when seeking to retake the government benches during an election. The politics then emerge through debates about spending priorities (Kelsey, 2015). At the end of 2019 the government found itself with a large surplus and so in early 2020 it has decided that roading and transport infrastructure was to receive by far the largest chunk of this funding. But that all changed as the government tried to find ways to respond to COVID-19 over March–May of this year and as we moved into a mandated lockdown within a global financial crisis beyond the living memory of most. The COVID-19 crisis created the opportunity to do away with the Budget Responsibility Rules that the government had set for itself, by referring to the 'Rainy Day' opt-out clause in order to 'weather the global storm' (Robertson, 2020, p. 3).

The budget released this May had the title Well-being Budget to address well established and ongoing concerns for child poverty in New Zealand (NZ Treasury, 2020). However, the challenges of COVID-19 give the title of Well-being new meaning (Robertson, 2020). This is the second year that the government has reported on child poverty and the crisis will also test the government's intention to reduce poverty when it now anticipates unemployment will peak at 10% later in the year. Responding to child poverty was much easier to do in the context of relatively low government debt and large surpluses being reported before COVID. One of the strategies adopted by the government was to leave a large pot of undesignated money available, called the COVID Response and Recovery Fund (Robertson, 2020). At any other time, this would be seen as a means to purchase votes in an election year whereas the rationale is the government needs 'the flexibility to be able to respond as necessary' (p. 1).

This strategy has already created some new and unexpected policy outcomes. As part of the budget, it was announced that teachers in the education and care part of the teacher-led early childhood education sector would receive the same starting salary as kindergarten teachers who last year achieved pay parity with school teachers. The government has no mechanism for ensuring that education and care teachers are placed on the same salary scales as kindergarten teachers (May, 2019). Then less than a week after the budget was released, and there being very few big ticket items in the schooling sector, the Minister of Education announces that centres will be funded to operate with 100% fully qualified teachers as identified in the Early Years Action Plan (EALP) to improve the quality of teacher–child interactions (Ministry of Education, 2019b). This was a key feature of the 2002 Strategic Plan that had not been achieved (May, 2019). It will not be required that centres operate with 100% qualified teachers as kindergartens are expected to, but rather this is to 'incentivise' centres to work towards this level of staffing. This funding did not appear in the education appropriations within the 2020 budget, but presumably came from the COVID Response and Recovery Fund. This would account for one of the three rationales provided for the funding, which was to 'help maintain employment opportunities for qualified and certificated teachers in a COVID-19 environment'. This is rather generous given there is currently a shortage of qualified teachers and initial teacher education providers are struggling to attract the numbers into early childhood education programmes

that they have in the past. Working towards parity for all teachers (EALP objective 3:4) should go some way towards addressing this problem, but it is difficult to see how the current government will ensure it is still about in the late 2020s to regulate for 100% qualified teachers (EALP, objective 3:1). The likelihood that history will repeat seems high.

In the meantime, before COVID, it looked like the next election would be a close run race. However, the current Prime Minister, Jacinda Adern's popularity has soared as a result of the way she has responded to the crisis (Quinlivan, 2020). At the same time, one week after the budget, the leader of the opposition was replaced because there was no obvious way that he could make a reasonable attempt to win an election 4 months out. As happened 3 years ago when the current PM was plucked from the back benches and made leader of the Labour Party, the current opposition has taken the same approach. We are in for an interesting end-of-year run-up to the election in September 2020 as we look to see how the opposition party reinvents itself. It will be very difficult for them to out manoeuvre what the current government is doing for children and families. However, with their current popularity, it may turn out that the Labour Party could form a government on its own.

During this last week, children have returned to early childhood settings and schools. Cafes and bars have started to open. For the moment we are getting used to reports of zero new cases of COVID and so there is hope that, in New Zealand at least, the initial health challenges are over, but 2021 is a long way off and there are further waves or shocks to come as a result of corona virus. Watch out for the fourth wave of the pandemic (Babaian, 2020) or wider geopolitical consequences (McTague, 2020).

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