



Book Review

Reforming Education: the New Zealand Experience, 1984-1996

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A review of

*Reforming Education:
The New Zealand
Experience, 1984-1996*

by Graham and Susan
Butterworth, published
by Dunmore Press,
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In June 1996, two freelance professional historians, Graham and Susan Butterworth, were contracted by the Ministry of Education to write "a proper history of the [1984-1996] period", with particular reference to the New Zealand education reform process (p.12). Their work is based on over 40 interviews conducted between 1994 and 1995, including, for example, four Ministers of Education; the CEOs of the Education Review Office, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and the Ministry of Education; and teacher union officials. Most of these involved interviewing "the main architects of the reforms" (p.11). The result, the Butterworths state early in their study, is "a history based largely on the viewpoint of insiders" (p.12). They claim that an internal perspective on the reform process was urgently needed, because "the insiders have not communicated well with the outsiders" (p.12).

To what extent have the authors succeeded in producing a readable and informative account of the education reforms? Their success, in our view, is a partial one, because of the way in which the study was conceived. From the outset, the Butterworths stress that their work is not a history of education. Having preferred to label it "a study in public policy and administration" (p.12), the authors maintain their research demonstrates that the recent education reforms represent "a revolution from within...[rather than] an overthrow by outsiders"

(p.10). For such a claim to be substantiated, however, it is necessary to compare and contrast insiders' and outsiders' assessments of the policymaking process, its implementation, and its consequences.

In a study which unapologetically examines insiders' perspectives on education policy, it is difficult to assess, comprehensively, the reaction(s) of those people and groups external to the policy process itself; those who must translate a given policy into practice in classrooms and other educational settings. Readers will note, however, that the authors are alert to some of the policy consequences; they allude to the turmoil and distress that accrued, and endeavour to take some account of the viewpoints of spokespersons for teachers' unions, colleges of education, polytechnics, universities, and various educational associations. Regrettably, the examination of this material is brief, because the Butterworths are satisfied that "the hardships and drawbacks have been vigorously documented by others" (p.12).

As a study of the thinking of education policy makers, the book has much to commend it. Readers will learn something about the political, social, and economic contexts within which Russell Marshall, David Lange, Phil Goff, and Lockwood Smith, as Ministers of Education, made crucial policy decisions. They will also see how the four ministers responded to briefing papers,



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reports, and, on occasion, statements from political colleagues and education spokespersons - all of which reveal perceived contemporary education deficiencies and their proposed resolution.

What emerges consistently throughout the book's nine chapters is the commonly held view among policymakers that no real or viable alternative existed to a wholesale reform of the New Zealand education system. The Butterworths point to "the emergence of a substantial consensus in political and administrative circles" (p.51) about the types of reform that needed to be implemented. In a similar vein, they refer to "the fact that the education sector was ripe for change" (p.14) post 1984, which the authors attribute in large part to the rise of "consumer movements" (p.30) and the perceived political need to use schooling and education as instruments to 'transform' the New Zealand economy (p.33). Such a transformation would allow "the needs of commerce and industry" to be satisfied (p.63). We anticipate that educators will not be surprised to learn that the debate between policymakers, politicians, and government officials generally had less to do with education philosophy per se than with attempting to improve administrative and fiscal 'efficiency'.

The Butterworth's discussion of the Picot, Hawke, and Meade reports (all released in 1988) clearly demonstrates the breathtaking speed with which the Labour government sought to address 'problems' in the early childhood, compulsory, and post-compulsory education sectors. The authors note (correctly) that the Picot report favoured "greater parental choice in schooling arrangements and greater community control over schools" (p.73), but the virtual absence of external commentaries in the book means that the consequences of advocating 'choice' and 'community control' remain largely unexplored. What we regard as being an inherently flawed recommendation - the State Services Commission's (1987) advice that "policy and

regulatory functions should be separated from operational activities" (p.76) - is not investigated in this study. Instead, the authors boldly claim that with such a separation, the SSC was merely attempting to prevent 'provider capture' (p.85), and to allow a Minister of Education to receive truly independent advice from officials. Later in the book we see that the Butterworths approve of the SSC mantra being extended to the establishment and operation of the Education Review Office (see pp.126-7).

Chapter six, appropriately titled "Into the Whirlwind: The Lange-Ballard Period, 1988-89", neatly captures the essence of the policy implementation process, one in which a short timeframe was deemed to be crucial to the success of the reforms. The authors provide

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a valuable discussion of some of the implications of the Picot, Hawke, and Meade reports and of the implementation process itself (involving writing school charters; electing Boards of Trustees; establishing the new Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office, and several non Ministry agencies such as the National Education Qualifications Authority (NEQA- later NZQA) and the Special Education Service (SES)). According to the Butterworths, "astonishingly little went seriously wrong" with the reform implementation process (p.139), especially when considering the pace with which changes were being

introduced. Nevertheless, one noteworthy omission by the Picot Taskforce that the authors highlight in chapter six was their inability to consider the possibility of large-scale school truancy: We suggest (cynically) that truant students' responses to the Taskforce's rhetoric of 'school choice' was to exercise their choice not to attend any school!

The Butterworth's examination of the fate of the Parent Advocacy Council and the Community Education Forums (pp.131-3), and the problems involved in determining school funding (pp.136-9), gives a valuable insight into policy intentions and practical implementation difficulties. Several of these concerns confronted Phil Goff when he succeeded David Lange as Minister of Education in August 1989. He had to "sort out boundary disputes between agencies" (p.144), listen to the new Ministry's forthcoming policy advice, as well as endeavour to soften up the tertiary sector (pending the introduction of tertiary-specific reforms) so that they might view these reforms more favourably. Faced with an unenviable range of responsibilities, Goff expected to encounter resistance from the early childhood, compulsory, and tertiary sectors (as well as from the teachers' unions) to the Picot and post-Picot reforms. Goff's main challenge, according to the authors, was to "[create] a steady state system" (p.143); unfortunately, they do not define what a 'steady state' might entail.

We are told that Goff was ably assisted by Maris O'Rourke (Secretary for Education), "a tough achiever" (p.146) who knew precisely what needed to be done, and by whom. O'Rourke is depicted as an exceedingly versatile administrator - supremely confident in her own leadership abilities and administrative vision (pp.146-7, 150-1, 195). Her skills would be utilised, it would appear, because of Goff's conviction that the former system of educational administration had "operated in a highly centralised,

complex and sometimes rigidly bureaucratic way” (p.152).

According to the authors, the most obdurate institutions were the universities. Their governing authorities were especially resistant to the government’s reform efforts, because they were concerned to preserve their institutional and academic autonomy, based upon a lengthy history of independence. The universities’ case for special consideration was weakened, the Butterworths declare, by the peculiarly Marxist inclinations of some academic staff in education departments and faculties. We are told, for example, that university academics “seldom questioned education policymakers or officials” (p.157), and displayed little or no interest in researching educational administration or economics. Did the authors consider thoroughly examining the academic literature to ascertain the extent to which their informants were correct in their pronouncements? Evidently not. Readers could perhaps be excused for thinking that university staff had little of value to offer to any policy debate, if the Butterworth’s account is accepted uncritically.

Chapters seven and eight are devoted to a discussion of Lockwood Smith’s achievements as Minister of Education (1990-96). He is portrayed as a hard working visionary; a politician who promptly addressed complex educational and financial matters when they arose. What the authors could have emphasised, however, is the fact that seldom, if at all, did Smith or his advisors appear to give much thought to problems likely to arise from implementing the reforms. For example, difficulties associated with budgetary constraints (1990-91), bulk funding of schools, determining tertiary student allowances, the setting up of ERO, and the teacher unions’ response to the reforms, appear not to have been contemplated. The impression readers gain of the 1990-94 period, therefore, is one in which problems tended to be addressed only when they surfaced, rather than being anticipated. We suggest that such an

approach reveals much about how public policy’ was being interpreted and implemented.

There is no doubt, however, that Smith had certain educational goals in mind. Two of these related to ERO and NZQA. He introduced legislation designed to emphasise ERO’s independence from the Ministry, and sought “to draw a sharp distinction between the policy and operational functions of central government, as exercised by the Ministry, and the audit and review functions of ERO” (p.188), in keeping with the SSC dictum mentioned previously. Judith Aitken, CEO of ERO (1992-), preferred this approach to the fuzzy paternalism of the old inspectorate’ (p.196); as a result, she was opposed to ERO assuming any pastoral role in its work within the compulsory schooling sector (p.197).

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The Butterworths conclude their discussion of ERO with the remarkable statement that the production of a series of reports “indicated that ERO was now a mature institution” (p.197). If the publication of reports is to be linked to institutional maturity, then it can also be argued that the publication of school inspectors’ reports dating back at least to the 1877 Education Act (in the Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives) points to a ‘maturity’ on the part of the inspectors and their employing authority (initially regional Boards of Education, but, from 1914, the Department of Education). We presume that this is not what the Butterworths had in mind. Based on

the authors’ critique of the former inspectorate, readers are encouraged to believe that the quality of ERO’s work generally represents a massive improvement over that of the inspectorate. Fortunately, for those sceptics among us, David McKenzie’s (1994) research (not cited by the Butterworths) provides a valuable counterpoint to much of the official rhetoric associated with ERO. Critiques of NZQA’s philosophy and activities (McKenzie, 1992; Irwin, 1994) are also available, although these, too, are not referred to by the authors.

Readers who are desperate to know what Lockwood Smith’s guiding education ‘vision’ was will discover in chapter eight that it involved creating a “seamless” education system. This system was expressly intended to break down barriers that were seen to exist between schools and other education institutions, to emphasise vocational training, and to ‘upskill’ the New Zealand labour force (p.210). Such transformations were to be assisted by the introduction (post 1991) of a new national curriculum framework, an industry skills training strategy, and the education development initiative (EDI), all of which were outlined in various government publications between 1991 and 1994 (see Smith, 1991; Ministry of Education, 1993; Ministry of Education, 1994). What is left unexplored, however, is the reality that both Smith and the Ministry appeared to have little or no understanding of New Zealand’s history of education, particularly with reference to the development of technical and vocational training and important distinctions between qualifications and credentials (McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1990; Lee & Lee, 1992; Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993). The tensions inherent between some of the educational and economic aims in a document such as Education for the 21st Century (for example, promoting both skill acquisition and performance as well as a general, comprehensive, compulsory curriculum) are not noted by the authors. What conclusions, then, do

the Butterworths draw from their study of the 1984-96 education reforms? They are quick to suspend judgement about the more recent reforms, in the belief that "it is too early to assess [both] the outcomes.... [and] the level of satisfaction with the reforms" (pp.233-4). Nevertheless, the authors confess to adopting "a generally positive view of the reforms" (p.234), because these allegedly eliminated "the old, overgrown, centralised bureaucracy" (p.234) and created simpler and "more transparent" structures. Such claims, of course, invite further research, as do pronouncements such as "ERO's independence is important in assuaging public concerns about education" (p.236), and that the "boldness" associated with the establishment of NZQA "seems to have been warranted" (p.241).

Notwithstanding some pertinent observations by the authors, there is little appreciation that the intense competition between institutions in the post school sector ought to be attributed to both the Labour and National governments' unapologetic advocacy of competition. Instead, they persist with the mistaken impression that institutional competition will automatically secure greater institutional diversity and accountability (see pp.238-241). Likewise, pupil retention at school (pp.250-1) and entrance to tertiary institutions (p.251) is not explained in terms of a rising credentialism in a tight employment market. The Butterworths are also unaware that increasing the school leaving age by government regulation is only one of several factors to be considered when explaining changes in people's school attendance behaviour.

The authors appear convinced that the recent reforms neither undermined "the fundamentals of education" nor introduced "many alien ideas" (p.253). But they omit to explain what these words mean. There is a tendency to use words as if they have only a contemporary origin or application (for example, reference to the "accountable model" and the scrutinising of "ends

and means" (p.253)), and to occasionally draw unsubstantiated conclusions. It is claimed, for instance, that New Zealand teachers have "much freedom" to decide what to teach (p.254), but such an observation ignores the intimate relationship existing between school curricula, syllabuses of instruction, and national examination requirements. This relationship transcends the legally enforced separation of NZQA from the Ministry of Education (p.254). Similarly, the authors' comments about teacher training in New Zealand avoid reference to the presence of private training establishments, and reveal a limited understanding of the work of

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existing state teachers' colleges or colleges of education (p.249).

Despite the reservations outlined above, the Butterworth's book is an aesthetically pleasing publication. It includes many amusing cartoons on educational matters, and has three excellent appendices as well as a carefully compiled index. Comprehensive endnotes are also included for each chapter. We have no doubt that readers will find much fascinating material within the work, and that they will gain valuable insight into how Labour and National governments conceived of public policy in education. But the authors' reluctance to more fully utilise the existing body of historical literature in education has resulted in some rather bold remarks about the efficacy of the reforms. Several authors external to the policy formation process are able to bring historical and other perspectives to bear upon the education reforms of

the past fifteen years. We suggest that it is therefore unwise to describe public policy by largely ignoring the conflicting perspectives of both internal and external commentators. To this end, Harold Silver (1983), a prominent British educational historian, urged researchers "[to look] at the diverse meanings on both sides of relationships", because he was convinced that "our capacity for renewed and effective action may depend on them" (p.275).



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