

The New Right Ideology and Educational Research Practice in New Zealand

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Introduction

This paper begins by outlining the ideological background to the New Right, the circumstances and context which facilitated its ascendancy and the key concepts it encompasses. From there it will link these concepts with the reforms that have taken place in the public sector and, more particularly, education and educational research, concluding with a discussion on the impact they have had on the latter two areas. Finally, it examines the implications that this manifestation of New Right doctrine has had for educational research and, in particular, argues that the struggle for ideological dominance in this area is not a one off policy development but a critical objective for the maintenance of its proponents' policy and political influence.

Background

According to Harker (1997:16) the reformation of this country's educational research regime was based on a "new right advocacy" that featured doctrinal concepts such as functional separation of policy, contestability of funding and public good outputs. Although these areas have had a significant impact on educational research, it is important to examine them in both their historic and policy contexts (i.e. New Zealand economic liberalisation and public sector restructuring) so that relevant and logical conclusions can be drawn on their application.

It is important to realise that the current reforms are not just isolated changes in policy but part of an overarching strategy that has neo-classical or neo-liberal economics and free market philosophy as its core. This strategy has an ethic that features powerful themes of nation, family, duty, authority, standards and traditionalism coupled with self interest, competitive individualism and anti-statism (Apple, 1991:10).

This body of theory first emerged when Adam Smith (1776) formulated his concept of capital in the *Wealth of Nations*. This has been developed into human capital theory. This theory which according to Peters & Fitzsimmons (1994:17) became "the most

influential economic theory of western education.” According to human capital theory individuals invest time and money (including foregone earnings) in education, training and other qualities that increase their productivity, and therefore their worth, to an employer. Individuals who do this are said to have greater human capital.

Over the centuries two schools of thought emerged, that in which acquired capacities were considered to be capital, and humans were not, and that where human beings themselves were considered to be capital. Add to this the two basic assumptions of neo-classical economics.

Peters, citing Fred Block says:

“This is the idea that the economy is an analytically separate realm from society that can be understood in terms of its own internal dynamics. Economists are perfectly aware that the economy is influenced by politics and culture but they see these as exogenous factors that can be safely bracketed as one develops a framework that focuses purely on economic factors.

The second key foundation is the assumption that individuals act rationally to maximise their utilities. Here, again, economists are acutely aware that individuals are capable of acting irrationally or in pursuit of goals other than the maximisation of utility but the strategy of excluding these deviations from the rationality principle is justified by the effort to identify the core dynamics of an economy.” (Peters & Fitzsimmons, 1994:8)

The rationale behind the latter statement is that although individuals in a market economy will act out of self interest, they will inadvertently work for the greater good of society as if by some guiding “invisible hand”. Although citing large tracts of text is regrettable it is important that the ideological links with the past are established for it is in the western liberal democracies of the 1980s and the 1990s that these theories and assumptions have continued to form the basis of restructuring the state. More importantly, they have provided the foundation for the self regulating market model that “harmonises” transactions for products, labour and capital. (Peters & Fitzsimmons, 1994:8) This model has had a direct impact on educational research.

Reforms

As can be seen, New Right philosophies are hardly new but their ascendancy in the political arena is a recent event. This started in the 1970s in part as a result of the international economic crisis caused by the 1973 oil shocks or oil price rises affecting both American and British economies, and coming to a height during the 1980s and 1990s after what has popularly been called “the Crisis of the Welfare State” (Rudd, 1993:241-242) or “Crisis of Keynesianism” (King, 1987).

Disaffection with the economic policies of the day that saw then as inefficient, bureaucratic and interventionist that in turn supported a welfare state that was “too costly, complex, paternalistic and a luxury the country could not afford that caused culture of dependency” (Haworth, 1994:23) created a policy vacuum which New Right doctrine readily filled.

Ashford (1993:20) believes this New Right doctrine had a six part agenda: “the reduction of inflation, lower taxation, privatisation, deregulation, the use of market forces in the public sector and institutional and constitutional reform.” Much of the above was used to justify a cut in state expenditure. This was because a high state expenditure, in turn, fuels inflation and stifles enterprise. Dale (1994:73) says that one of the causes also believed to contribute to excessive state spending, in addition to obligations and expectations in the welfare area, was “provider capture” where bureaucrats, “like anyone else”, were expected to pursue their own ends.

“Frequently, state bureaucrats are granted tenure for life and cannot be dismissed for poor performance. This notion of the self interested, unaccountable and hence inefficient and inflationary bureaucrat is extended to other categories of public employees, such as teachers.” (Dale, 1994:73)

This disaffection manifested itself in the election of the Fourth Labour Government in 1984 whose response to the crisis was one of deregulation, decentralisation and devolution. (Peters, Marshall & Massey, 1994:255)

Phase one of this strategy saw Labour liberalise the economy or deregulate by abolishing subsidies and tariffs, the finance and foreign investment markets were freed up and a floating exchange rate was instituted. This was closely followed by the restructuring of the core public sector (government trading organisations such as the

Post Office) were corporatised (i.e. became State Owned Enterprises) and, in some cases were privatised as in the sale of state assets like Telecom.

New Right policy was apparent, among other things, as an emphasis on policy rather than management, a devolution of management control coupled with new accountability structures, contracting out, an emphasis on efficiency, profit and cost cutting, the breaking up of large bureaucracies into autonomous agencies and contestability of public service provision. From 1987 onward, the restructuring of the residual public sector began and included the portfolios of education, health and social welfare.

In line with the New Right's philosophy the government broke down large bureaucracies into autonomous agencies, disestablishing government controlled research units such as the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). These were reformed as a "number of Crown Research Institutes (CRI) governed by appointed boards" (Harker, 1997:17). The CRIs were to operate in a business like manner bidding from a central foundation for research funds which were allocated according to public good research categories determined by the Minister and Ministry of Education.

"While the institutional structures have remained relatively stable, at least in their outward appearances, they have, nonetheless, undergone considerable internal change as a consequence of external political forces. How research is more generally organised, prioritised and funded has had a significant impact on how educational research is organised and prioritised and funded" (Clark, 1996:110).

Impacts

With the instigation of Labour's reforms, three key New Right strategies were adopted into the restructuring of research. There was separation of function i.e. policy advice, funding allocation and research conduct were held to be "distinct" and therefore "bureaucratically disconnected components". According to Clark (1996:111), policy is determined at a Cabinet level whereas research funding allocation is mostly the responsibility of a quasi-autonomous organisation, the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST). This was established to purchase research on a contract basis from those researchers whose projects were favoured at the time.

“The reason for introducing the separation of function is this: to eliminate provider capture by those engaged in research.” (Clark, 1996:113)

The net effect of this restructuring has largely resulted in the policymakers and allocators gaining more power while the researchers have almost no control over their work.

The second strategy was that of contestability where the Government removed itself from the allocation process and handed this responsibility onto a mechanism administered by the Foundation called the Public Good Science Fund (PGSF).

“The Foundation is charged with allocating this contestable pool of funds to research providers under neutral conditions where the bids are assessed according to such criteria as quality, price and government priorities... to purchase public good science outputs that contribute economic, environmental, cultural and social benefits to New Zealand.” (Clark, 1996:115)

Clark believes the operational definition of public good is a critical factor in determining what research is funded. The commonsense idea that education is a public good has been supplanted by a technical definition that heralds from economic theory where “pure” public goods are those which are non-exclusive, non-competitive and non-positional. As education has none of these characteristics New Right proponents argue that it be treated like any other commodity or private good in the market place.

The outcome of this is that commercial organisations are restricted from this funding to prevent research being privately or otherwise captured by providers and consumers. More importantly, the PGSF was started to channel government investment into the research priorities set by government policy, making it difficult for research outside these parameters to gain access to these funds.

Another impact has been the theoretical language used as the framework for the reorganisation of research. This has seen the rise of such terms as objectives, inputs, outputs, outcomes, providers, scientific methods and near market research which, according to Clark (1994:5), indicates that public good research is being driven by New Right economic theory and the “empiricist philosophy of science.”

Other impacts have been the limitation of funding to narrow definitions of research and a conflict between policy and practice which sees researchers critiquing New Right ideas yet willing to accept Ministry research contracts to investigate New Right practices.

The former has become manifest in the Ministry of Education's recent Tertiary Education Review White Paper (1998) which calls for accountability for the quality of research being undertaken in the tertiary sector.

Currently this type of research is funded to the tune of \$100 million as part of the per-student tuition subsidies and ,as such, its distribution to institutions is based on student numbers. The White Paper proposes to transfer 20% (\$20 million) of this amount to a contestable fund which researchers can then access provided they meet certain criteria, a process aimed at assuring "research quality and accountability" (ibid:28).

This will give all users confidence in the quality of degrees and will ensure that public tertiary education funding is supporting research of appropriate quality. The ultimate sanction for failure to comply will be removal of recognition to approve or award degrees. (ibid: 30)

The remaining \$80 million will continue to be allocated through the tuition based subsidies, however, it is the government's intention to review this process in 2201 with a view to reversing the current situation and increasing the contestable pool to \$80 million.

A key aspect is that, unless providers have had the quality of their research assured by the quality assurance process, they will not be able to access these funds. More particularly, the contestable fund targets "advanced, high quality research portfolios with a strong strategic focus" which the White Paper defines as those that develop the "innovation and human resource capabilities of New Zealand" (ibid:33).

Other criteria being taken into account are the quality of the proposed research portfolios, their cost effectiveness and the quality and capacity of the researchers seeking funding who will need to submit their research "track records."

Although the Ministry of Education will maintain overall policy responsibility for the fund, its administration will be taken over by an agency experienced in managing such research funds." Advantage could then be taken of the considerable expertise that has been built up through administering similar contestable research funding (ibid:33).

The key issue here is what is quality research and whose definition of it will researchers and their proposals be judged by?

Implications

The implications for educational research are that a "war of position on the educational terrain" (Grace, 1991:148) is underway for the ideological domination of research and educational research for it is through sanctioned research that New Right philosophy is legitimised. Evidence of this can be seen in the Treasury's concerted effort to seize the moral high ground in this area through the systematic discrediting of the idea that education is a public good and educational research is worthwhile per se.

"The agenda asserts that education is a commodity in the market place like any other; that the existing publicly provided service is deficient in many respects; that many of the benefits of education are subject to individual capture rather than being contributory to social and public good and that the Government's existing role in education is counterproductive to its declared commitments to greater social equity and that this would be better left to the operation of a free market."
(Grace, 1991:148)

To this end, the New Right theorists have used "anti research" and Treasury's own research capacity to undermine the credibility of educational research and researchers.

"The Treasury writers have systematically assembled all the research evidence which shows that the promise of greater social equity in education is not being realised." (Grace, 1991:148)

Grace believed Treasury was selectively using educational research scholarship and research to further its ideological goals. This selectivity takes the form of strategic omission, selective reporting and, in some cases, "the exploitation of real weaknesses" where there has been a dearth of research in areas such as class size issues and school effectiveness. According to both Grace and Clark, the direction of future educational

research should challenge the assertions of New Right ideology that “state provided education has a crisis of standards.”

“To play the Treasury at its own game by producing studies to demonstrate how the New Right ideology has failed to meet the very objectives it has set out to achieve.” (Clark, 1994:7)

Grace believes the biggest challenge is linked to the education of citizens, education democracy relations and the idea of public good benefits. Rather than being taken as a “tenet of faith” the concept of education as a public good must be “demonstrated historically, comparatively, conceptually, and empirically that it is more than faith.” (Grace, 1991:273)

Whether Treasury takes such moves lying down is unlikely. It is capable of setting broad philosophical and theoretical frameworks within most policy areas and because its traditional function of financial controller has involved it in a whole range of government activities, Treasury has been able to establish and maintain a dominant position in economic policymaking. (Goldfinch and Roper, 1993:52)

“By so doing the Treasury is able to define the central questions for analysis, exclude certain issues from consideration and reject policy solutions which do not conform to accepted wisdom.” (Boston, 1994:205)

This war of position and ideological manoeuvre hinges on who controls and determines what constitutes educational research, for it is through communication of such activity that an ideological position can be legitimised.

“Communication is an essential part of all political activity, as people exchange information and try to persuade others to their point of view. (Mulgan, 1994:266)

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(Apple, 1991; Ashford, 1993; Boston, 1994; Clark, 1994; Clark, 1996; Codd, 1990; Dale, 1994; Goldfinch & Roper, 1993; Grace, 1991; Harker, 1997; Haworth, 1994; King, 1987; Mulgan, 1994; Peters & Fitzsimmons, 1994; Peters, Marshall, & Massey, 1994; Rudd, 1993)

