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New Zealand Education’s Progressive Origin:
1937 to 1944 - The Seven Years from Idea to Orthodoxy

Daniel James Couch

Abstract

1937 marked a pivotal point in New Zealand's educational history. An international organisation known as the New Education Fellowship held a conference in New Zealand. Fourteen internationally renowned lecturers spoke on topics concerning the reorganisation of education in democratic societies. The New Education Fellowship delegates lectured from a pedagogical understanding which had most notably been developed by John Dewey and was referred to as both progressive education and new education. By the closing lecture of the conference, the idea of a new education pedagogy had been introduced to mainstream New Zealand educators and public.

Through the development of a thorough understanding of this conference, a historiographical survey follows the influence this idea exerted over the following seven years as it made its way from an idea to a pedagogical orthodoxy by 1944. Fundamental elements of Dewey's new education are identified. New education quickly found support from the Department of Education, the Minister of Education, and the Prime Minister during the 1937 conference. The bulk of national educators were quick to adopt and begin to experiment with the new pedagogy in the short months and years following the 1937 conference. The way in which these developments took place is examined in depth through this thesis. The new education pedagogy began to experience criticism in the early 1940s. The Minister of Education called the 1944 Education Conference to put an end to mounting criticism of the educational reforms and policies which had been introduced in the seven years since the New Education Fellowship lecturers had launched progressive education into mainstream New Zealand.

The course of the investigation identifies confusion surrounding the conflation of pedagogy and curriculum in its historical context in New Zealand, and in its modern form. Yet perhaps more importantly, this study identifies the origin of progressive education in New Zealand’s educational history and tracks the development of progressive pedagogy as it was propelled into orthodoxy through social, economic, and political means. In so doing, the origin of the split between progressivist and traditionalist educators still evident in New Zealand’s modern educational setting is identified.
To my wife, Susie Couch.
Because I could not have reached this point without you.

To my parents, Jim and Lois Couch.
For encouraging me at every turn.

To my Lord.
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And to my wife, thank you for all the meals you made, lawns you mowed, clothes you washed, dogs you walked, and firm German encouragement you provided whilst I toiled away on the beast. I suppose I shall have to make a rather difficult choice now: further study, or start to help around the house.
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