Teachers' Work in Aotearoa New Zealand's Changing Policyscape

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It is not easy to be an educator in 2025 in Aotearoa New Zealand. Amidst a variety of pressures, many educators continue to see their role as not merely a job but rather a privilege to guide, support, and empower future generations. However, while teaching is never 'easy', it seems that attacks on education, educators, and widely shared values in education such as equity, fairness, and a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi have been relentless in the policyscape over the last 12-18 months. Looking back at the past two editorials in *Teachers' Work*, we critiqued the progressing privatisation and commercialisation of education (Couch et al., 2024), and the ongoing attempts of the current government to undermine Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a foundational document of our government and society (Jones et al., 2024). As Alwyn Poole opines in The Post (Poole, 2025), our education system appears to be in decline on multiple levels and none of the recent successive governments have made any substantial inroads that would address key issues, such as "an overworked and under-appreciated teaching profession; a general over-reliance on market-driven policy; a culture of testing, measurement and accountability; ongoing equity and access issues; and a lack of urgency in preparing students for the 21st century" (Baker, 2023, p. 14). Although one can argue that much has changed in recent years, these issues remain or indeed are being exacerbated.

The Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce (2019) report, as indicated by Baker (2023) above, outlined many significant issues facing our education system. The review has served as an impetus to a vast range of changes, some of which can certainly be seen as improvements. Examples are a number of initiatives including the removal of National Standards, a curriculum refresh (since called into question by the current government), removal of charter schools (which are now reinstated), adding New Zealand history to the curriculum, shifting the funding model of schools, and many more. Baker (drawing on Thrupp & McChesney, 2019) lists eight groups of recommendations that reach across all aspects of our education system, including governance, schooling provisions, competition and choice, learning support, teaching and pedagogy, school

leadership and resourcing, and central education agencies. Overall, Baker summarises the key message of the task force: our education system is largely underserving students across the board "and only 'cultural and structural transformation' of the system will ensure that all students can succeed" (Baker, 2023, p. 15). The report explicitly stated that tinkering around the edges will not be sufficient to prepare future generations for the complex challenges society will face. However, the actions taken by the Labour government at the time were more in line with a tinkering of the existing system than an overall structural transformation.

Fast-forward to 2025, we find ourselves in a 'back-to-the-future' scenario, where education hubs are disestablished, charter schools are back, a national testing regime is tendered that could see national standards re-emerge through the back-door (see Wrathall & Estellés in this issue), targeted support for Māori students and te reo Māori are disestablished, and much more. Taking a brief look at one of these re-emergences, Wrathall and Estellés explain that the current government seeks to increase standardised testing across the country in spite of research which outlines significant negative potential effects on learners' identity and motivation. This is not to say that all assessment is bad: diagnostic and formative assessment practices that inform teachers and students of current achievement and supports targeted approaches for educational progress are certainly helpful; comparative assessment with peers (or against external standards) that leads to direct or indirect ranking and categorisation of students as (under-) performing is not. Importantly, a push towards standardised assessment can exacerbate inequalities that already exist within our education system. While the Ministry of Education acknowledges persistent systemic inequities affecting Māori and Pacific learners, many assessment practices remain summative and standardised. In contrast, research shows that Māori and Pacific students benefit from formative approaches that emphasise strong relationships with kaiako [teachers] (Mahuika et al., 2011; Houghton, 2015). Culturally responsive assessments value learners' worldviews, prior knowledge, and identities. These characteristics of assessment are often not prioritised in standardised testing.

As ever, education is a political project. Much of what is proposed and already implemented often relates directly to ideological positions on the nature and purpose of education, sometimes in direct contradiction of research evidence. Operating within changeable educational policies from one change of government to the next, the education system and educators in Aotearoa New Zealand find themselves in an apparent ping-pong game with constant changes imposed from the top every time a new government comes into power. This flip-flopping in education alone likely compounds many of the pressures in the system and contributes to the further unsettling of our teacher workforce, our international standing, and how well our students are served by schools. Every significant change binds resources and teachers' time to adapt to new demands. Constant changes in prescribed approaches to curriculum and pedagogy reduces the capacity of teachers to become proficient in any given approach (cf. Gerritsen, June 2025a) and be creative in their practice. The establishment and disestablishment of infrastructure such as the education hubs, charter school schemes, and other aspects of the education system (e.g. polytechnics and Te Pūkenga) also require large amounts of funding that could be used to address

some of the key issues educators cry out for, such as the underfunding of the learning support system.

This is compounded when prescribed pedagogical approaches are arbitrary or supported by contested evidence such as the 'structured maths' approach that does not really exist in the first place (Pomeroy & Darragh, 2024). To name another example, the cultural harm caused by language loss, following the disestablishment of Te Ahu o te Reo and Resource Teachers of Māori, is real and economically measurable. A landmark case by Atawhai Tibble and Conal Smith used wellbeing and census data to estimate over NZD $53 million in damages due to loss of te reo Māori (Tibble, 2025) – this number was calculated for only a single iwi [tribe], of which there are many across Aotearoa New Zealand. This quantifies what many Indigenous peoples have always known: that language is central to identity, wellbeing, connection and intergenerational success. Despite this, recent government strategies in Aotearoa New Zealand have reduced funding and support for Māori language revitalisation in schools, compounding harm.

The tertiary education system is also at breaking point. University funding has been slowly eroding over many years (Gaston, 2023) and the current budget seems to point into the same downward direction after a short-term injection with emergency funds under the last government (Gerritsen, July 2024). The government also changed the funding landscape for research, significantly reducing (if not flat out removing) research funding for humanities and social sciences in Aotearoa New Zealand. This seems contradictory to the government's own proclamation of education as a national priority area and the supposed focus on evidence-based practice. However, research funding to create evidence for good educational practice in Aotearoa New Zealand has become nearly impossible to obtain. Another factor is the disestablishment of Te Pūkenga after only two years of operation, and despite the polytechnic sector becoming financially viable again (Gerritsen, June 2025b). Undoubtedly each major change in structure will cost millions in public money and lead to substantial disruption and decline in productivity of the system as a whole. Much could be said at this point about the long-term effect on Aotearoa New Zealand's economy and society with declining educational achievement of our young generations (e.g. Gaston, 2023; Wright, 2024). However, at this point, we want to shift the focus from the depressing to the hopeful for education.

What solace, what hope can educators hold during challenging times? To begin, we can start by recognising the amazing work thousands of educators do every day despite the challenging educational landscape and pressures in their classroom practice. As McGee (1997) stated, teachers are the ultimate classroom decision makers and have to mediate the conflicting expectations from ministries, parents, students and themselves. However, teachers also have the agency, the power, to make decisions that respond directly to their students' needs and situations. Within this agency, there is considerable hope. Writing of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Hope, Torres-Olave (2021, p. 128) reminds us that Freire's work "invites us to overcome [transactional and neoliberal models of education] through hope, in a non-idealistic but ontological manner, acting in the world to transform oppressive conditions, expanding possibilities for social justice". This is not necessarily a call for civil disobedience, especially not a call to jeopardise one's own professional position. Rather it is a reminder that teachers' ultimate responsibility is to our children and young people, and to our society (not the

government), as is stated in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council, 2017): "As teachers, we respect our trusted position in society and recognise the influence we have on learners, their understanding of the world and the future wellbeing of our society" (opening page)[1]. Teachers have the agency and opportunity to construct positive relationships with parents and our community. Alongside this we must listen to the voices of our rangatahi [youth], they are astute and observant and experiencing our education system daily. Their insights and moemoeā [aspirations] offer direction for what education could be and should be. Such moves retain hope in, through and for education in changing times. For instance, they offer tangible opportunities which can combat some of the harm that will likely follow the government's punishment initiative to combat truancy. A more promising approach can be found in evidence-based practices, such as E Tū Tāngata (1News, June 2025), supported by researchers from the Faculty of Education at Canterbury University. In closing, we invite teachers, principals, ministerial officials, and politicians of all parties to base decisions about education on research evidence, including the voices of educators and young people, rather than purely (or mainly) on political ideology. In doing so, there comes collective hope that we can create the best educational environment for our young generation, one which serves their wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of our society and a positive collective future.

[1] Although we want to acknowledge that other parts of *Our Code, Our Standards* can be critiqued as arguing the contrary. See Rozas' opinion piece in this issue, for example.

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