'A government of transformation': An analysis of the initial education policy directions of the Labour-led Coalition Government of New Zealand 2017-2018

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Abstract

From the outset, the Labour-led Coalition Government of 2017 was intent on 'transformation'. For the education sector, this was signalled immediately with the announcement of an extensive programme of review and reform initiated in their first 100 days of power. Yet, what is at the heart of the proposed changes and what were they trying to address? Drawing on Bacchi's (2009) *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* approach, we examine the significant problems identified by the in-coming Government through key public messages during their first eight months (October 26th, 2017—June 30th, 2018). By analysing official discourses released by Ministers, we examine how the problems which the policies intended to address were constructed and represented to the public. Our analysis identified four main 'problems': the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession; the quality of public education; equity and access; and preparedness for the 21st century. We conclude by examining how the representations of these problems may provide key insights into how imagined solutions are proposed and enacted in the future.

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Introduction

On the 8th November 2017, Dame Patsy Reddy delivered the words of New Zealand's new Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, during the traditional Speech from the Throne:

"This will be a government of transformation" (Ardern, 2017).

From the outset it was apparent that the Sixth Labour Government (or 'Labour-led Coalition Government') was intent on disrupting the status quo. This was particularly the case for education as Reddy outlined the new Government's plans to "revolutionise education" (Ardern, 2017). Yet, why was this revolution needed? What were the problems in education which needed solving? According to Bacchi (2009), policy problems do not exist out there waiting to be address and 'solved', instead, "problems are created by a policy community" (p. 199).

In this paper, we examine the official discourse about educational policy reform during the first eight months of the Coalition Government (October 26th, 2017—June 30th, 2018) and consider the problems they set out to address. Since being sworn into office, the new Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins (supported by Associate Ministers of Education, Kelvin Davis, Jenny Salesa and Tracey Martin) announced a significant change in vision and direction in New Zealand education (Benade, Devine, & Stewart, 2018; Devine, Stewart, & Benade, 2018). Benade, et al. (2018) suggest that many of the policies announced by Minister Hipkins were specifically designed to position the new Government as *different* from what came before, ready to inspect and review almost every aspect of New Zealand's education system.

This process of repositioning has been noted in many transition governments and relies on a rejection of the past and the recreation of a new future (Lingard, 1993). Underpinned by Bacchi's (2009) *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* approach, our focus in this paper is to examine the key messages that the Government was articulating during their first eight months to consider why these reforms were needed and how perceived problems were constructed, represented and communicated. Our interest therefore was in strategic communication to the public about the need for change and the creation of a new 'Education Vision' (Hipkins, 2018i). While the first eight months were marked by the initiation of many key educational reform processes, including the 'Big Reviews' (such as the *Tomorrow's Schools Review*, and the *NCEA Review*), alongside several Key Initiatives (such as *Curriculum, Progress, and Achievement*) and Medium

Term Strategies (such as the *Tertiary Education* and *Early Learning Strategies*) (see summary Ministry of Education, 2019), our primary analysis is of statements to the media and associated avenues of communication, as most of the Reviews were undertaken away from the public eye at this time.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with an overview of our theoretical position through Bacchi, followed by an outline of our data collection and analysis methods. We then outline the four 'problems' our approach identified and consider how these were represented through public discourse. Through a problem representation approach, we analyse how these problems have been constructed consider how the representation of these problems may provide key insights into how imagined solutions are proposed and enacted in the future.

Theoretical approach: *What's the Problem Represented to Be?*

Policymaking in education is far from a linear, simple or neutral process. Instead, as Bell and Stevenson (2015) suggest, policy is the 'realisation of contested meanings' (p. 147). By this, they propose that education policies are developed and enacted as a result of complex and contested socio-political processes. A key approach to the study of education policy reform that we apply in this study derives from Bacchi's (2009), *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* [WPR] approach. Drawing from post-structuralism and its critiques of binary oppositions, a WPR approach rejects the linear and binary assumptions of traditional rationalist approaches to policy analysis which focus on 'problems' and 'solutions', and instead understands policy as a contested political process. In particular, a WPR approach focuses on the problems which policy are attempting to address:

> The WPR approach starts from a simple idea: that what we propose to do about something indicates what we think needs to change and hence what we think the 'problem' is. (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 16)

Bacchi argues that when creating policy, the solutions envisaged are shaped by how the problem has been represented. For instance, solutions to address drug abuse will largely be shaped by whether the problem has been framed as an issue of health or criminality. It is the *representation* of a problem – or 'problematisation' – that a WPR analysis is concerned with.

WPR is based on the idea of 'policy-as-discourse' – discourse shapes how 'problems' are framed in a particular way within policies (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018, p. 150). A WPR analysis asks us to 'work backwards' from a policy proposal, allowing us to "'read off' the implicit problem representation within it" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 19). Once we understand how a particular problem has been constructed and represented (or 'problematised') we can explore the discourse on which the problematisation relies, allowing us to judge the effects of framing the problem in that way. In particular, WPR is interested in the implications of this framing, including what is left unproblematic and whether the problem can be framed in a different way (Bacchi, 2009). It was this approach which underpinned our examination of the official discourse of the Coalition Government in their first eight months through the method described in the next section.

Data Collection & Analysis

Our data for our WPR analysis drew from a variety of publicly-accessible data that related to education policy and the Government's proposed reviews and reforms. Our key interest was in the 'messaging' of the Coalition Government to the public and therefore our sources of data included: cabinet papers, media interviews, press releases, and parliamentary speeches and debates. The process for data collection involved purposeful selection in order to manage the large amount of data for which we used the following criteria. Firstly, due to the need to contain the data, we narrowed down the time frame from October 26th 2017 (when the Coalition Government was sworn in) to June 30th 2018 – roughly the first eight months in office. Our logic for this time frame was that it would enable us to observe the 'problematisation' period of a transition government which was of greater interest to us in this study than the implementation phase. Secondly, because we were concerned with how officials have constructed and represented problems within policy discourse, the data had to be part of the *official* discourse – in this case, the words of the Ministers themselves – *not* the words of journalists, the public, etc. We also intentionally excluded documents involving the policy reviews and taskforces as this was beyond the brief of our focus (Table 1). Thirdly, this official data had to relate to New Zealand's education system, in particular discussions around: current 'problems', proposed changes, and visions for the future and therefore needed to be 'relevant' to our focus (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Criteria for Data selection

Criteria	Description
Accessibility	Publicly-available and accessible
Timing	First 8 months in office (October 26th 2017—June 30th 2018)
'Official' Discourse	Words of Ministers themselves (Cabinet papers; media interviews; press releases; parliamentary speeches and debates)
Relevant	Must discuss New Zealand's education system, in particular: • Current 'problems' • Proposed changes • Visions for the future
Exclusions	Policy Review documentation Taskforce briefings etc.

Our search strategies included the following. All data were accessed online: copies of relevant cabinet papers were accessed through the Ministry of Education's website; interviews were accessed through the respective websites of broadcasters; copies of press releases were accessed using *Scoop.co.nz*; transcripts of Parliamentary business were accessed through Parliament's 'Hansard' online database. Where transcripts of interviews already existed online (published by *Scoop.co.nz*), these were used to speed up the collection process. On websites with a built-in search function, the general search term of "education" was entered in combination with either "Chris Hipkins", "Kelvin Davis", "Jenny Salesa" or "Tracey Martin" to focus the possible search results towards education.

As our interest was in the messages provided to the general public before the implementation phase of education reform, we restricted our media analysis to content provided by Radio New Zealand (RNZ), Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and MediaWorks only. RNZ was included as it is New Zealand's public broadcaster. TVNZ and MediaWorks were included as they run two of New Zealand's major free-to-air television channels ('TVNZ1' and 'Three' respectively) – through which they broadcast two of New Zealand's significant political current-affairs shows: *Q+A* (TVNZ1) and *Newshub Nation* (Three). One exception, however, is the 'Facebook Live' interview with Minister Hipkins, run and hosted by the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite not being broadcast by the above broadcasters, this online interview with the Minister was included as the Council is the professional body that governs the teaching profession in New Zealand. While these data sources have some obvious limitations, our attempt to contain data and analyse key public messages meant we prioritised these forms of public discourse.

Text from these sources was either copy-pasted directly (when possible) or transcribed manually (e.g. radio interviews). Data were then compiled, ordered and reduced in order to manage the data prior to analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1998). These data were then coded to allow common themes to be explored and closely analysed. We used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Patton, 2002) to identify these themes with a particular focus on the problematisation and representation of educational issues (Bacchi, 2009). The indictive analysis involved initially coding ideas through an open-ended identification of ideas (such as assessment, teacher professionalisation), followed by a deductive WPR examination of the construction of 'problems' within these themes. This analysis enabled us to identify four major themes (or 'problems') and a number of subthemes which were checked and corroborated between the two authors. For instance, under the theme "Quality of Public Education", three sub-themes emerged: funding and resourcing; marketisation; culture of testing and accountability.

What were the problems that emerged from the official discourse?

The four main problems that were represented within the official discourse included: the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession; the quality of public education; equity and access and preparedness for the 21st century. This section will outline how these four problems were represented or 'problematised' within the official discourse following a WPR approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

'Problem' One: *The De-professionalisation of the Teaching Profession*

The problem which had the most significant weight of representation within the official discourse in these early days of the Coalition Government was that the teaching profession has been, and continues to be, 'de-professionalised'. Specifically, the official discourse emphasised the difficulty to recruit and retain teachers when the *status of the profession* itself is being undermined. Key arguments to support this claim, put forward by the Ministers responsible, included the public perception that teaching is not a valued profession, teachers are not trusted as highly as other professions, too much emphasis is placed on measurable results, and teachers are struggling to find the time to teach with an increasing assessment workload.

It was also acknowledged that the teaching profession in New Zealand is not afforded the same level of *trust* as other professions. Both Hipkins and Associate

Minister Martin argued that the autonomy of teachers and their profession is seriously undermined by an *increase* in outcomes-based systems focused on measurement, comparison and targets, with a *simultaneous decrease* in control over their governing professional body, the Education Council. Martin argued that National Standards was an example of a policy that, through its focus on measurement and comparison, contributed to the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession: "National Standards…was never about children's education. It was about checking on teachers" (TVNZ, 2017). In reference to the professional oversight of the profession, Hipkins argued that teachers have little control over the Education Council, furthering the process of de-professionalisation:

> This Government believes that the teaching profession deserve to have the same autonomy that we give to doctors, to lawyers, to nurses, and to many other professions. We trust teachers, we respect them, and we believe that they should have a say in how their profession is governed. (Hipkins, 2018c)

Ultimately, it was argued that we must increase our trust in teachers and their profession as they are the people who actually *deliver* education policy: "…no Government can deliver on its commitments in education without teachers" (Hipkins, 2017b). Martin argued that to increase trust, we must: "return to a high-trust educational model where we put the learning and teaching first, rather than the measurement of what a teacher is doing in the classroom" (TVNZ, 2017).

Furthermore, our analysis of this problem representation highlighted how the increased focus on measurement and accountability extended into the issue of teacher workload. Specifically, workload was discussed by Hipkins in terms of imbalance – too much testing, not enough teaching: "Teachers are being so wrapped up in this requirement to test all the time, they're not actually getting time to teach" (Mediaworks, 2017). Hipkins and Martin argued that this emphasis on testing was a huge burden on teachers' time and ultimately a waste of resources. For instance, Hipkins described National Standards as a "failed experiment that has wasted enormous amounts of time and energy and produced misleading results" (Hipkins, 2017a). In response, Hipkins made it clear that: "This Government is firmly committed to more teaching, less testing" (Hipkins, 2018h).

In light of these issues, a key 'solution' approach (Bacchi, 2009) advocated for by Ministers was the need to *re*-professionalise the teaching workforce. Minister Hipkins

outlined his vision to "see teaching as one of the most respected professions in the country" (Mediaworks, 2018). However, he acknowledged that this is not currently the case: "I don't think we value [the profession] enough. I think we can value it a lot more" (RNZ, 2017). To position teaching as a highly-regarded career that is both rewarding for teachers and valued by the public, Hipkins often discussed the need to perceive teachers as vital to equipping citizens with what is necessary to ensure the future prosperity of individuals and society:

> [Teachers] are the people who do the work on a day-to-day basis to make sure young New Zealanders get the very best possible start, and increasingly, to make sure adult New Zealanders get second opportunities at learning, because we know that more and more of that is going to be required in the future. (Hipkins, 2017b)

In sum, Hipkins (2018i) argued that "The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in raising achievement" (p. 11). The 'problem' has thus been represented as an issue of a poorly valued profession, in which members are inadequately trusted and overworked (largely due to system level problems, e.g. National Standards and NCEA). These factors combine to result in a de-professionalised teaching profession.

'Problem' Two: *Quality of Public Education*

Another problem that was evident throughout the official discourse – and closely associated with Problem One – was the idea that the *quality* of New Zealand's education system was under threat. Our problem representation analysis identified three themes relating to quality: insufficient funding and resourcing of schools; an over-reliance on market-driven policy; and the development of a 'culture' based on testing, measurement and accountability.

To sharply juxtapose this Government from the previous, Hipkins made it clear that the National Government had significantly under-funded public education: "The [previous] Government made decisions about education for the short term, rather than for the long term" (RNZ, 2018b). Schools, he said, are "struggling to cope with outdated facilities" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 12) *and* a lack of capacity: "We are not happy to leave kids in corridors, libraries, and gymnasiums because their schools don't have classrooms to put them in" (Hipkins, 2018b). Hipkins also noted a "shocking failure of planning by the previous National Government that has left an immediate shortage of teachers" and a

"ticking time bomb for schools" as many teachers are near retirement (Hipkins, 2018g). Such discourses clearly represented the blame for these problems to be at the feet of the previous Government, which now required a rapid response to improve the quality of public education, by re-prioritising toward "young people and their needs at the centre of the system and increasing funding at all levels" (Ardern, 2017). In addition, Hipkins argued that public education has to be reframed as something that benefits everyone: "Public education belongs to us all" (Hipkins, 2018a).

Within the official discourse, the quality of public education in New Zealand was identified as being threatened by excessive marketisation and privatisation. In addition to the concerns raised in Problem One regarding the relationship between increased testing and trust in teachers, Hipkins argued that collecting data for comparative purposes only aggravates competition between schools and generating 'league tables' which were "just out of control and we've got to start scaling that back" (Mediaworks, 2017).

Associate Minister Salesa outlined the Government's position, saying: "We do not agree with privatisation of our education system" (Salesa, 2018). Hipkins has said that ECE in particular has become marketised and profit-driven, to the detriment of quality learning: "There's been a big focus on quantity and on participation…and now we want to focus on quality as well" (Education Council, 2018). For children at primary and secondary schools, Hipkins argued that, despite the strong community input *Tomorrow's Schools* allows, it also allows for too much competition between public schools:

> [*Tomorrow's Schools*] was initially a community responsiveness model…[but this] rapidly shifted to a competitive model…the competition was for students rather than improved education results…the benefits from this change have run their course. (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 11)

Competition, he argued, was at odds with the Government's goal to ensure that the education system "brings out the very best in everyone" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 19). In contrast, Hipkins argued that we must develop a new, fairer system where *all schools are good schools* and everyone benefits equally: "Every child is a priority learner. Every school will be a great school. Every child will have the opportunity to achieve their full potential" (Hipkins, 2018e).

Hipkins suggested that existing devolutionary policies need to either be reviewed (e.g. *Tomorrow's Schools*) or removed altogether (e.g. Charter/Partnership Schools).

Partnership schools were described by Hipkins as an "ideological experiment" and a "distraction" from the "core mission" of providing a quality public education system (RNZ, 2018a). Charter schools, he argued, are not needed as there are already provisions within the state system to ensure all students can succeed; policies like partnership schools only undercut the state system (RNZ, 2018a).

Finally, the issue of a *narrowing* curriculum also emerged. Citing NCEA as one example, Hipkins argued that the culture of testing and accountability encourages a culture of valuing only what is assessed and disregarding other learning:

> …the culture has basically become 'if it's not assessed it doesn't count, it doesn't matter' – and actually we want to say 'well, the learning you do at school *all* counts, but not all of it counts to NCEA'. (TVNZ, 2018)

In sum, the 'problem' that the quality of New Zealand's education system was under threat and focused on three key factors: inadequate funding and resourcing, a system that has become too marketised – through the likes of *Tomorrow's Schools* and *Partnership Schools/Kura Hourua*, and, the prevalence of a culture of testing and accountability that had increased competition and narrowed the curriculum. In response to these problems, the Coalition Government's proposed solutions included greater funding, reduced models of competition and testing, and the removal of partnership schools.

'Problem' Three: *Equity and Access*

The third problem to emerge from the official discourse was that the education system was not adequately addressing issues regarding equity and access. In particular, that New Zealand's education system had too many barriers for students, was not inclusive and responsive enough to students' diverse needs, and that it was difficult for Māori students to succeed 'as Māori'.

Hipkins argued that education is an important equity tool and is therefore something that *everyone* should have access to, regardless of background. Salesa, echoing Beeby's (1956) famous speech, emphasised this belief when, in reference to tertiary education, she said:

> We should make sure that we allow everyone, regardless of where they live, regardless of what part of New Zealand they come from, regardless of what ethnicity they have, and

regardless of what earnings their parents have to at least have the opportunity to go through and train…This is universal education. (Salesa, 2017)

As a result, Hipkins argued that we must reduce barriers that impede people's access to an education. One of the biggest barriers discussed was financial, especially in regards to tertiary education: "We cannot burden future generations with the cost of tertiary education or block access" (Hipkins, 2018d). Hipkins made clear the benefits to individuals through their early-off-the-ranks Fees Free policy:

> [*Fees Free* ensures] that [New Zealanders] are going to be getting out of debt faster once they complete their studies or their training. That means that they're going to be able to get on with their lives. (Hipkins, 2018f)

In addition to the benefits enjoyed by individuals through reducing financial barriers, Hipkins also argued that there are benefits to society:

> We know that investment in our people is one of the most important investments a Government can make. (Hipkins, 2017b)

Here it is implied that investing in a well-educated and skilled society will provide returns to society as a whole.

Hipkins also made it clear that, in regard to issues around *access* and *responsiveness*, New Zealand's education system has not been inclusive enough. Hipkins argued that we must ensure that all people are able to be included and participate fully in the education system: "All citizens have the right to be included and learning in the education system and to receive the individual support they require to succeed" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 12). In terms of responsiveness, Hipkins argued that the education system needs to be capable of responding to the needs of *all* students:

> Our system needs to be fair and unbiased in its delivery – and engage every learner through dynamic and engaging learning, that recognises and draws on the unique identities, languages and cultures of every child. (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 3)

Related to the idea of a more responsive system is the need to be "supporting Māori to succeed as Māori" (Davis, 2018). That is, Māori should not have to sacrifice their identity and culture in order to succeed in the education system; instead, it is the the education system itself that should adapt and respond to the needs of Māori. As Hipkins argued, there is a need for a "responsive system" that will: "strengthen the capability of the education system to respond to the identity, language, and culture of children and

young people to support Māori succeeding as Māori" (Hipkins, 2018k, p. 7). Hipkins was careful to note that this does not mean "directing [Māori and Pasifika] into a narrower range of educational opportunities" – rather, and consistent with his inclusive approach, he argued that "all of the educational opportunities should be available to all young people" (TVNZ, 2018). Aside from this overt focus on Māori students, we noted that in this time period very little mention was overtly given to other groups.

The 'problem' of equity and access was thus represented around issues of barriers to education, and the lack of inclusion and responsiveness of the system to students' diverse needs, especially Māori. Education was positioned as a great leveller of disadvantage and it was acknowledged that barriers exist which limit one's ability to access an education.

'Problem' Four: *Ill-prepared for the 21st Century/Global Marketplace*

The fourth major problem to emerge from the official discourse is that of New Zealand's education system being ill-prepared to meet the needs of the 21st Century and the global marketplace. In particular, the concern was that students were not being adequately equipped with what is needed to succeed in the modern world.

Drawing from the 'knowledge economy' discourse (Gilbert, 2005), Hipkins argued that we need to prioritise the teaching of '21st-century skills': digital literacy, soft-skills, and 'learning to learn'. According to Hipkins (2018j), digital literacy is needed to "prepare [children] for the modern workforce." A focus on soft-skills is essential for the modern world, as workers are required to: "be resilient, creative, and adaptable, with great communication and interpersonal skills, and prepared to work collaboratively as well as independently" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 19). Finally, students must: "'learn to learn' so they can have a secure future" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 3).

A closely associated argument made by Hipkins was that, in order to more closely align the education system with the development of 21st-century skills, education needed to be repositioned as something that is 'lifelong' and learner-centred. Hipkins described education as a "lifelong journey…[where] people are going to have to move in and out of the education system throughout their life" – in order to upskill and retrain for the yet-to-be-created jobs of the future (Hipkins, 2018f). Moreover, a "personalised learning experience…that brings out the best in each and every individual" was noted as an

important part of adapting "to the needs of the modern world" (Hipkins, 2018i, p. 3). Hipkins implied that by personalising learning, students will remain engaged in the education system and are more likely to develop the skills needed for the modern workforce. This learner-centred approach to education achieves Ardern's (2017) goal of "placing young people and their needs at the centre of the system."

The 'problem' of being ill-prepared for the 21st Century and the Global Marketplace has therefore been represented as an issue of students lacking the specific skills to succeed in the modern, globalised world. This rhetoric, firmly rooted in the 'knowledge economy' discourse, has not changed all that much since the last National Government (Wood & Sheehan, 2012). Personalised, learner-centred learning is seen as critical to allowing *all* students to develop '21st-century skills' *and* transform learning into something that is lifelong (Hipkins, 2018i).

Discussion

It is clear that the four main 'problems' that emerged from the official discourse were represented or 'problematised' in particular ways. These problematisations have in turn helped to shape the *responses* to these problems, in the form of the proposed changes signalled by the Ministers in these first eight months in power. As Bacchi (2009) reminds us, the insight of a WPR approach is its ability to uncover problem representations, and to see where they *do*, and by implication, where they *do not* lead. In this discussion we examine this more deeply to consider the implications of these problem representations, their contradictions and how they shape imagined solutions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018).

In our analysis, Problem One – *The De-professionalisation of the Teaching Profession* – positioned teaching as an undervalued profession that is being de-professionalised, due to the combination of low levels of trust and excessive workloads. Because the problem was framed in this way, the solutions proposed to re-professionalise the profession centred around *increasing trust* in the profession. Therefore, the recent proposals could be seen to indicate a more transformative approach to education, moving against the previous National Government's accountability agenda, which promoted a 'culture of performativity' (Ball, 2003) that, ultimately, was based on the "mistrust" of teachers (Codd, 2005, p. 194). Closely associated, Problem Two – *Quality of Public*

Education – positioned the quality of New Zealand's education system as being under threat from a period of sustained underfunding, too much priority given to marketisation, and a culture of testing and accountability.

One result of asking repeatedly What's the Problem (represented to be), reveals the layers of nesting of problem representations and the stakes they involve (Bacchi, 2009, pg. 128). In the case of these first two – and the most prevalent – problem representations, we see two associated ideas working closely together to lend a sense of 'crisis' to the education sector that was positioned in response to many years of neoliberal approaches to educational delivery in New Zealand. While we lack space to interrogate this history here, the these two nested problem representations are not new, and reflect a sustained and well-documented critique of New Zealand's neoliberal education policy which has pushed for simultaneous devolution and control, marketisation and competition in for more than thirty years (Codd, 2005, Devine et al., 2018; Dobbins, 2010). The framing of these problems of educational and teacher quality targeted the previous National Government, and in particular, their policies of reduced funding, privatisation, marketisation and testing regimes. By representing the problem in this way, the Ministers' proposals drew attention to their desire for 'transformation' within the sector. This was characterised by a reduction in competition, greater funding, less exposure to marketisation, and less emphasis on testing and targets. Through this problem representation, the transformative potential in these new proposals were able to be presented in clear opposition to the policies of the previous National Government. This contrast was represented by a vision of a quality public system of education equipped by professional and trustworthy teachers that ensures *all schools are good schools* (Hipkins, 2018e).

The latter two problem representations indicate a mix of 'old' and 'new' ideas. Problem Three – *Equity and Access* – was framed around the idea that New Zealand's education system needs to be more accessible, inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students, especially Māori students and those who need extra support (e.g. special educational needs). This approach is not entirely new; while in office, Minister Parata strongly acknowledged the need to target those statistically underachieving, especially Māori (Parata, 2012). The previous National Government advocated for a 'horizontal equity model', where different schools could cater to different needs (as seen with the Partnership Schools Model). The current Government, however, has indicated

some potential for transformation by opting for a 'vertical equity model' – where all students will be catered for within one responsive system (Olofson, 2018). Also new were the ideas of increasing accessibility through reducing financial barriers for all (e.g. *Fees Free*) and Hipkins' implication that it is in society's interest for the Government to 'invest' in a well-educated society – in direct opposition to the previous National Government's individualist mantra of 'personal responsibility' (Hipkins, 2017b). Problem Four – *Ill-prepared for the 21st Century/Global Marketplace* – was framed around the 'crisis' of students not having the '21st-Century skills' to succeed in the modern world, and the lack of personalised learning to achieve this goal. These ideas were not new, nor especially transformative, as they reiterated the ideas of the 'knowledge economy' discourse – ideas that have influenced the educational policies of the previous National Government and the Fifth Labour Government before that (Wood & Sheehan, 2012).

While Problems One and Two have thus been framed in transformative ways that signal a change in direction from the previous National Government, Problem Three highlights a mixed approach that retains some of the status quo, with some potential for transformation. Problem Four meanwhile, with its focus on 21st Century Learning and the 'knowledge economy', indicates no change in direction.

So, what are the implications for representing the problems in this way? In this final discussion we turn to Bacchi's (2009) question 'What is left unproblematic in particular representations (p. 2)?' What are the contradictions, silences and further problems that result from this? One of the most apparent contradictions is how the focus on equipping students for the global market place involves an implicit commitment to the appendages of this global education field. In particular, an enduring characteristic of New Zealand's educational field in recent times has been its commitment to be well-positioned within the global educational rankings (Dobbins, 2010). Dobbins suggests that New Zealand has actively made the 'export' of tertiary and secondary education to foreign students a core national industry. This industry relies heavily on international rankings and marketisation of New Zealand's merits in global trade fairs. This has made New Zealand education strongly susceptible to global changes in international student markets, and sensitive to anything that tarnishes the reputation and image of New Zealand's educational quality (Stray & Wood, 2018). What is left problematic by the representation of Problem Four, is the unstated reliance on international testing regimes

(such as PISA) for New Zealand's positional merit globally and the ongoing need for testing data to feed to this industry in the Knowledge Economy (Lauder et al, 2012).

The reduction in testing and marketisation of education Problems Two therefore stands in opposition to New Zealand's on-going commitment to the competitive global market economy (Problem Four). On one hand, Hipkins argued that the education system has become too marketised and focused on competition (Hipkins, 2018i); while on the other, education was positioned as key to ensuring students are economically-competitive individuals within a 'knowledge economy' (Hipkins, 2018k). Therefore, although Hipkins promoted a de-marketisation agenda in Problem Two, this was largely focused on reducing competition within the system itself (e.g. schools competing for students and funding under *Tomorrow's Schools*) – marketisation remains a goal to ensure students succeed within the so-called knowledge *economy*.

One further question Bacchi encourages in a problem representation approach is to ask how responses would differ if the problem was represented differently? It is assumed within Problem Three that *access* to a (responsive) education is the solution to underachievement and the effects of social inequality. Aside from the focus on responding to students' diverse needs, the proposed changes do little to address the underlying causes of underachievement and inequality. For instance, the *Fees Free* policy is focused entirely on allowing universal access to tertiary education and training, regardless of background, through reducing financial barriers. However, *Fees Free* fails to address larger issues of systemic inequalities and differences in 'cultural capital' and the fact that, regardless of who pays, some students may be advantaged when entering tertiary study, as they may hold 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) that is 'valued' within the institution, while students that do not are at a disadvantage (Sotardi, Thompson, & Brogt, 2019).

The assumption that universal access to education is the solution to addressing underachievement and inequality also assumes that people want to participate in the state system. For instance, some Māori – such as those advocating for charter schools – would argue that the state system has failed Māori, and being forced to participate in the state system, regardless of how 'responsive' it is, is an affront to *Tino Rangatiratanga* – or the ability for Māori to have self-determination over their own affairs, including education (Collins, 2013). Furthermore, the proposed plan to increase the system's responsiveness for Māori – by allowing "Māori to succeed as Māori" (Davis, 2018) – was entirely based

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around responding to the 'identity', 'language' and 'culture' of Māori – with *no* mention of knowledge (Hipkins, 2018d, p. 7). In other words, this plan is based on what Cooper (2012) describes as the 'Culture Thesis' – where indigenous peoples are thought of as *producers of culture* yet *incapable of producing knowledge*. In education, this often manifests as surface-level, 'culturally responsive' policies (Nakata, 2002). Therefore, the Government's proposal to increase responsiveness is not so transformative but 'culturally responsive', to the detriment of developing Māori knowledge. Finally, apart from this (problematic) plan to increase the system's responsiveness for Māori, no substantial plan is presented as to how the system can become more responsive for other groups.

Conclusion

After three terms in opposition, the new Coalition Government proudly positioned itself as "a government of transformation" (Ardern, 2017). Our analysis through a WPR approach shows that in the first eight months (which is certainly a short timeframe to judge a government's reforms), the Coalition Government worked to clearly represent the problem of an education system in need of change, revitalisation and transformation – indeed, a need to "revolutionise education" (Ardern, 2017). Our analysis revealed four problem representations that centred on issues of teacher professionalism and the quality of the overall system, as well as some problems associated with issues of equity, access and an internationally competitive educational marketplace. Our problem representation analysis pointed out how these first two problems were positioned in sharp contrast with the National Government, which had the effect of creating a greater imperative for transformative change. This declared change was centred on a shift away from neoliberal, competitive and de-professionalising spaces of education, towards more culturally and economically inclusive, well-funded and professional quality spaces for children and teachers.

Our focus on problem representations also revealed some contradictions and internal tensions. Specifically, we pointed out how the Problem Four – the need to equip students for the global economy – potentially contradicted visions of reduced testing, less marketisation and decreased competition. We also identified some of the limitations of the problem representation by the Coalition Government seen through narrow conceptions of cultural, economic and educational inclusion which potentially overlook

structural differences already present in society. The imagined solutions for Problem Three around equity and access may still require a deeper and more systematic responses if change for previously marginalised groups is to be transformative.

Our study has some obvious limitations due to its imposed time period for data collection and the relatively small data set which was able to be analysed. The paper also fails to interrogate the extensive review programmes implemented by the Coalition Government from 2018 onwards. An analysis of these would provide a much richer understanding of this Government's programme of educational reform. The paper however does contribute a useful analysis of the processes of policy change following governmental transition. In particular, a problem representation approach revealed the active construction of 'problems' by the in-coming government that required policy responses and solutions. Our research identified and clarified key messages, contradictions and competing political agendas which underpin these policy reforms (Bacchi, 2009). Our hope is that this analysis serves to equip educators and policy makers with fresh insights and greater critical awareness of how problems are 'created' and represented by governments, as well as the type of solutions imagined, proposed and potentially enacted in the future. This provides an opportunity to evaluate in future analyses how effective this Government has been in resolving these problems.

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