Contractualism, Contestability and Choice: Capturing the Language of Educational Reform in New Zealand

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One of the most striking features of recent educational reform in New Zealand has been a radical transformation in the language of policy. This is strongly evidenced in the policy texts
and official documents that have shaped both the form and direction of public debate in recent years. These texts constitute a major break with the discursive tradition of the post-war era - a tradition in which education had come to signify shared values relating to national identity, group and community aspirations, and citizenship rights. In the new discursive order, the language of neo-liberalism and economic rationalism has acquired doctrinal prominence, entailing not only the emergence of a new set of key words, such as "choice", "efficiency" and "outputs", but also the adoption of a related set of basic metaphors, such as "consumer demand", "provider capture" and "contestability". This new language has had a major influence in legitimating the agenda for educational reform and defining the parameters of public debate.

A common strategy in the critique of New Right educational policies is to argue that their legitimation is purely ideological. This line of argument suggests that the language of market-liberalism is simply an appropriation of liberal discourse by dominant and powerful groups in pursuit of their own political interests. The problem with such analyses, however, is that they are based, in most cases, upon an idealist conception of language and are unable, therefore, to recognise the deeper structural causes of social change.

This paper takes a materialist position and argues that to understand properly the significance of policy texts in the process of educational reform, it is necessary to explain the material conditions within which such texts are produced and to examine critically the institutional practices which they are used to defend. The paper begins, therefore, by giving a materialist account of policy texts and their political functions within a capitalist welfare state such as New Zealand. It then suggests that the ascendancy of neo-liberal discourse is a consequence rather than a cause of structural changes within the New Zealand state and examines the theoretical bases of some of the educational policies that have resulted from those changes.
Finally, it concludes that the language of educational reform is important because of the theoretical assumptions upon which it rests and the institutional practices that it circumscribes.

The Interpretation of Policy Texts

From an idealist perspective, policy documents are interpreted as expressions of political purpose, that is as statements of the courses of action that policy-makers and administrators intend to follow. Within this view, the analysis of a policy document becomes a quest for the authorial intentions presumed to lie behind the text. It is a form of analysis which is frequently part of an instrumentalist approach to the whole policy-making process. Discrete functions are assigned to the policy researcher (who is a disinterested provider of information), the policy-maker (who produces the policy), and the policy recipient (who interprets or implements the policy). The document itself is regarded as a vehicle of communication between these agents within the process.

Thus, within an idealist-empiricist approach to educational policy-analysis, policy statements or documents relate educational intentions, in the form of values and goals, to factual information resulting from research. These statements must then be interpreted by those who would either discuss or implement the policy. This can be represented diagrammatically as in Figure 1.

Figure 1

An Idealist Conception of the Policy Text

RESEARCH INTENTIONS
(Facts)(Values/Goals)

POLICY TEXT
Because policy documents are construed as expressions of particular information, ideas and intentions, the task of analysis becomes one of establishing the correct interpretation of the text. When there is controversy surrounding the meaning of a document, it is assumed that some readers have misunderstood what was meant. One of the tasks of the policy analyst within this approach therefore, is to clear up such confusions and establish an authoritative interpretation. Such a task, however, presents obvious problems, given that many policy documents do not even have single identifiable authors and are inevitably addressed to a plurality of readers. Instead of searching for authorial intentions, perhaps the proper task of policy analysis is to examine the differing effects that a document has in the production of meaning by readers. Moreover, critique of the document itself should not be limited to questioning the clarity and logical coherence of its messages, nor even the truth of its assertions. Rather, it should be a matter of showing how it works as a text, of demonstrating the effects that particular readings can produce (Donald, 1979).

These questions can be directly addressed by an alternative approach to the analysis of policy texts that is derived from a materialist theory of discourse and the social reconstruction of meaning (Codd, 1988). Such an approach recognises that in interpreting a policy text, the reader's engagement is not with the mind of an author but with the text and its linguistic structures and meanings. It is the context of interpretation that is crucial and not the authorial
Employing Foucault's materialist theory of discourse, Ball (1990: 18) makes the point that: "Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position". This is why the use of words like "freedom" and "choice" within neo-liberal policy discourse must be understood in terms of specific institutional practices rather than as words bearing particular meanings.

The central point can be found in Wittgenstein's thesis that the meaning of words lies in their use. Following Bourdieu, this could be stated a little differently by saying that language is a form of social practice. Thus, language embodied in texts only has meaning when it is decoded within a context, and that is always a social and cultural context. For policy texts, it is the political/economic context within which they are constructed that circumscribes the uses to which they could be put.

Policy texts also signify different linguistic and cultural practices depending on the context within which they are decoded. Socially situated readers will respond to such texts in different ways. This has been clearly evidenced in the widely varying responses to the key policy documents in the New Zealand education reforms. A materialist analysis of these documents begins with their construction and investigates their content in terms of divergent meanings, contradictions and structured omissions which enable them to produce different effects for different readers. This method is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

Figure 2
A Materialist Conception of the Policy Text
Central to a materialist analysis of policy texts is the notion of discursive power. Only within a materialist view of language is it possible to show how discourse can mediate the exercise of power, for it must go beyond the meaning of what is said to the act of saying it. As Bourdieu has stated:

Language is not only an instrument of communication, or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. One seeks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. (Bourdieu, 1977: 648)

Because the state has a particular interest in promoting public discussion of educational policy, its agencies produce various policy documents which can be said to constitute the official discourse of the state. In this sense, 'discourse' refers to the real effects of language and the various uses to which language is put. Discursive practices are those uses of language which structure not only the way things are understood but also how we act towards them. Language can be political, therefore, not only by referring to political events, but by itself becoming the instrument and object of power (Coward and Ellis, 1977; Kress and Hodge, 1979). This explains why agents of the state produce particular forms of discourse in order to carry out their administrative, legal and ideological
functions.

Thus, policies produced by and for the state are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of a universal public interest. In this way, policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. These effects, however, remain unrecognised by traditional forms of policy analysis which are derived from an idealist view of language.

What follows from this discussion is that only a materialist theory of policy discourse can provide a satisfactory account of the way in which the language of neo-liberalism and economic rationalism constitutes a particular manifestation of deeper structural changes occurring within society. We can illustrate this further by examining more closely the structural changes occurring within modern capitalist welfare states such as New Zealand.

The Structural Context of Educational Reform

During the twentieth century, mainly in response to economic crises in the accumulation of capital, states have become more and more involved in the provision of services and in the operation of the economy. Different liberal economic theories have emerged to account for these developments. Keynesian theories are based upon the assumption that the market lacks the capacity to secure favourable profit conditions without regulatory state interventions, whereas monetarist theories assume that the accumulation process is self-regulating and therefore that the state should not intervene in the free market. Both these views have been prevalent at different times in shaping the economic policies of the New Zealand state. However, during the mid-1980s there was a sudden shift in government policy from the Keynesian to the monetarist position. This major shift from corporatism to neo-liberalism was to influence all areas of government policy, including education.
The political ascendancy of neo-liberalism in most democratic welfare states over the past decade or so has been well documented (Levitas, 1986; Barry, 1987; King, 1987). This movement has been shown to have three central elements:

i libertarianism, i.e. the promotion of economic individualism and freedom of choice;
ii monetarism, i.e. the maintenance of free market forces within a tightly controlled money supply; and
iii privatisation, i.e. the advocacy of minimal government and reduced state provision.

In some welfare states, most notably Britain under the Thatcher government, neo-liberalism has been accompanied by an equally strong resurgence of neo-conservatism. The main features of this movement are: strong government; nationalism; social authoritarianism; managerialism and hierarchical order. Although there are obvious contradictory tensions between these two movements, together they constitute a major force of opposition to traditional social democratic policies of welfarism and the expansion of citizenship rights.

The increasing prominence of both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, as Norman Barry points out, "has largely been generated by the crises of inflation, high public spending and slow growth that social democracies have experienced in the last ten years" (Barry, 1987: 20).

There is no doubt that welfare states all over the world have experienced similar structural crises. What is less clear, however, is why these crises have produced political opportunities for the resurgence of both neo-liberal and neo-conservative solutions. One theorist who perhaps goes further than most in providing a macro-social explanation for this re-orientation of political opportunities within the welfare state is Claus Offe.

The main thrust of Offe's project is to develop a theoretical analysis of the deep structural crises that have beset most capitalist welfare states over the past couple of decades (Offe, 1984, 1985).
He argues convincingly that policies of state intervention, while being necessary to sustain capital accumulation, effectively weaken the viability of the market, generate chronic fiscal problems and force governments to adopt policies of crisis management. Such policies are frequently structural in nature, creating new forms of administrative control and disorganising previous avenues of political demand. Current educational reforms in New Zealand can be readily analysed in terms of this thesis (Codd, 1990; Codd, Gordon, Harker, 1990).

Offe argues that welfare state policies do not necessarily or automatically serve the interests of the capitalist class. In his view, "what the state protects and sanctions is a set of institutions and social relationships necessary for the domination of the capitalist class" (Offe, 1984: 120) but it nevertheless seeks to implement and guarantee the collective interests of all members of society. In other words, the state works in the interests of the capitalist mode of production rather than exclusively in the interests of one class. In particular, it works to support the process of capital accumulation by providing a context in which the continued expansion of capital is accepted as legitimate. Moreover, the political power of the state depends, indirectly, on the private accumulation of capital which, through taxation, provides the state with its resources. The exercise of this power is legitimated through the democratic processes of election and representation. However, according to Offe, the state's role in the process of capital accumulation, while necessary to advanced forms of capitalism, produces a number of fundamental contradictions at the policy level. These contradictions frequently lead to the failure of policies in areas such as education but they often remain unrecognised because of the language in which such policies are couched. Thus, policies are produced in response to the failure of other policies leading to what Offe refers to as crises of crisis management. Examples within education can be identified in policies relating to assessment and credentialism, transition education and decentralisation of curriculum.
Offe theorises the liberal-democratic welfare state as comprising three inter-related institutional components or structural elements. These are:

i. the welfare state itself, with its state-provided services, programmes and collective goods;
ii. the market economy, with its guarantees of private property, free exchange and contractual rights;
iii. the system of political democracy, with its procedures for participation and representation.

Thus, according to Offe, the modern capitalist welfare state has a welfare component, a liberal component and a democratic component, each with its own tradition of political theory. Individual citizens can be seen to have a structural relationship to each of these institutional components. Firstly, they have a dependant welfare relationship to state-provided services and social-security provisions. Secondly, they have an independent liberal relationship to the market economy. Thirdly, they have a participatory democratic relationship to the political system. What this means, according to Offe, is that citizens are:

(i) the ultimate source of the collective political will, in the formation of which they are called upon to participate in a variety of institutional ways; they are also (ii) the "subjects" against whom this will can be enforced and whose civil rights and liberties impose, by constituting an autonomous sphere of "private" social, cultural, and economic action, limits upon the state's authority; and finally they are (iii) clients who depend upon state-provided services, programmes, and collective goods for securing their material, social, and cultural means of survival and well-being in society.

(Offe, 1987: 501)

At a macro-social level, the three institutional components of the welfare state are also structurally inter-related, according to Offe. Their relationships to each
other, however, are not necessarily harmonious. In fact, there are potential inherent tensions between each of the components and causal interactions that can be both supportive and antagonistic (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Structural Tensions Within the Welfare State

WELFARE STATE

Supportive or Antagonistic Relationships

MARKETPOLITICAL ECONOMY DEMOCRACY

In his earlier work, Offe (1984) focuses mainly on the tensions and contradictions between the welfare state and the market economy. This has also been the main focus of neo-liberal theorists (Hayek, Friedman, Nozick) and some neo-Marxists (e.g. O'Connor, 1984). Other theorists, as Offe points out (e.g. Wolfe, 1977; Macpherson, 1977; Levine, 1981) have focused on the relationship between market liberalism and democracy. Thus, it is the third relationship (i.e. that between the welfare state and political democracy) that in Offe's view "is relatively the most neglected one in the theoretical literature" (Offe, 1987: 503).

Offe (1987) begins his analysis of the relationship between the democratic and welfare components of the modern capitalist state by considering the plausible and, in his view, optimistic assumption that the relationship is necessarily a mutually
supportive one. Thus, the rational individual voter could be expected to support redistributive welfare policies for such reasons as:

ito avoid collective social "evils" (e.g. crime, conflict, disease);
iiias an investment in a positive public good;
iiiias an altruistic obligation to social justice.

While this makes sense in terms of social democratic theory, current social realities, Offe argues, presents quite a different picture, such that:

The mutually supportive relationship of mass democracy and welfare stateness
... no longer amounts to a convincing hypothesis. To the contrary, there are many indications ... that lead us to expect that democratic mass politics will not work in the direction of a reliable defence (to say nothing about the further expansion) of the welfare state.
(Offe, 1987: 511)

It is within this context of material conditions that neo-liberal and neo-conservative assaults on the corporatist structures of welfarism have gained popular support. State bureaucracy, paternalistic policies, centralisation of services, have produced what Offe calls "the destructuration of collectivities", which he defines as follows:

The disorganisation of broad, relatively stable, and encompassing commonalities of economic interest, associational affiliation, or cultural values and life-styles is in my view the key to an adequate understanding of the general weakening of solidaristic commitments. If it no longer "makes sense" to refer to a broad and sharply delineated category of fellow citizens as "our kind of people", the only remaining interpretive referent of action is the individual who refers to her - or himself in rational-calculative terms.
(Offe, 1987: 527)

Thus, it is the individual social actor, not the collectivity, that is central to the reconstitution of institutional practices. Moreover, the collapse of welfarism cannot be fully explained in
terms of an economic crisis of capital accumulation, nor in terms of the political dominance of free-market elites and neo-liberal ideology. The decline of political support for the welfare state, Offe argues, must also be explained in terms of a "structural disintegration process" through which individuals become "deeply distrustful of social policies as 'public goods'") (Offe, 1987: 528). This explains not only the substantive nature of the specific reforms that are occurring, but also the ascendancy of neo-liberal policy discourse.

The Theory and Practice of Neo-Liberalism

Most of the critical analysis of New Zealand's recent educational reforms has examined the influence of neo-liberalism, or New Right ideology, on the educational policies of the fourth Labour government (Lauder, 1987; Boston, 1987; Codd, Gordon, Harker, 1990; Nash, 1989; Middleton, Codd and Jones, 1990; Lauder and Wylie, 1990; Snook, 1990). To date, however, there has been little analysis of these policies in terms of their internal logical coherence and theoretical justification. Such analysis needs to begin with the documents that have preceded or accompanied the policies. By examining the assumptions behind this discourse and exposing its internal contradictions, we are able to evaluate the policies themselves in terms of their likely or potential social effects.

The obvious starting point for such analysis is the 1984 Treasury briefing papers to the incoming Labour government, entitled Economic Management. This document can now be seen as a comprehensive and clearly articulated statement of neo-classical economic theory combined with neo-liberal theories of state minimalism. It advocates the replacement of the state's redistributive role with the allocative role of the market and promotes the view that market exchanges extend the domain of choice, thereby reducing the amount of government intervention in the lives of its citizens and promoting the sum total of individual liberty. These arguments are extended to the social as well as the economic realm, proclaiming that the disengagement of the state and the application of market-based criteria...
in these areas is desirable to the extent that it is practicable.

In a section on the efficiency of publicly provided social services, Economic Management introduces for the first time the notion of "provider capture". This metaphor is used to depict a situation in which "without the constraints of the market, there is increased opportunity for public service providers to maximise their own interests rather than to maximise those of their clients" (Treasury, 1984: 257). In other words, "resource waste may occur because providers lack sufficient incentives to economise" (ibid).

The assumptions underlying "provider capture" are drawn directly from public choice theory which has been a major influence on all policies promoted by Treasury since 1984 (Boston, 1991). This body of theory (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Tullock, 1965) entails the application of economic assumptions and techniques to the analysis of political behaviour. Public choice theorists advocate minimal government and as King points out:

Their central contention is that the absence of market mechanisms (principally, the lack of profit incentives and constraints) from the arena of politics is responsible for the growth of government. (King, 1987: 11)

The main assumption underlying this theory concerns human motivation. It is the belief that all professionals, bureaucrats and politicians are entirely self-interested, such that their behaviour is directed towards opportunism. The problem of opportunism, according to Treasury, arises because "individuals are at least in part motivated by a concern for themselves" (Treasury, Vol.1, 1987: 12). It is considered to be part of the more general problem "of ensuring that individuals face incentives that align their interests with those of others" (ibid). This is how the problem of "provider capture" arises.

Such a problem does not arise within a system in which the welfare state and political
democracy are mutually supportive. Bertram argues that:

The ideal-type on which social-democratic strategies have been based is one which sees state power delegated to groups of vocationally motivated professionals, working in partnership to serve a 'public interest' defined through the processes of political democracy.
(Bertram, 1988: 147)

When political democracy and the welfare state come into tension, however, the thesis that state-employed professionals and bureaucrats are pursuing their own interests begins to gain some credibility. For public choice theorists, such a thesis becomes a self-evident truth when in fact it is little more than a pernicious doctrine. Bertram makes the point well when he states:
Modern public-choice theories which reduce professional behaviour to unidimensional maximisation, with the consequent prediction that self-aggrandisement is the norm, are open to charges both of cynicism and of implausibility when advanced as general theories.
(Bertram, 1988: 156)

One of the mechanisms proposed by public choice theorists as a counter to the maximising behaviour of public service providers is that of contestability. This is a form of actual or potential market competition. The assumption is that if a professional service is to be both efficient and responsive to consumer demand, there must be an ever-present threat of competition from other providers and concomitant opportunities for consumers to exercise market choice.

Another mechanism for the control of opportunism and the maximisation of self-interest by employees of the state is the contract. Services that have been traditionally provided by state officials, tenured professionals, and centrally administered agencies are "contracted out" to entrepreneurial agents who voluntarily accept the carefully specified terms of a finite contract. Such contracting is a direct application of agency theory or transaction-cost economics (Williamson, 1985; Perrow, 1986) and this also has been a major influence on Treasury policy proposals since 1984.
In the 1987 Treasury Brief to the Incoming Government, the discourse of neo-liberalism is used with considerable force to defend policies that if implemented would substantially reduce the state's role as the principal provider of education. Readers of this Treasury document are presented with the view that state intervention in education is neither equitable nor efficient. Although the evidence given for this view is both equivocal and inconclusive, the document asserts that such intervention for equity purposes would probably "produce effects that reduce rather than further some kinds of equity" (Treasury, Vol.2, 1987: 39). This assertion then becomes the major premise from which to advocate policies that would enable education to enter the market-place and thus lead to increased choice amongst its consumers.

As the reform agenda has unfolded, the promotion of choice has become one of the central policy objectives - a key that presumably is to unlock all that is both desired and desirable in education. The neo-liberal agenda is overtly responsive to popular desires for less obtrusive forms of social service delivery and a more participatory form of school administration. The major policy response is contained in the 1988 Report of the Taskforce to Review Education Administration (Picot Report) and the white paper, Tomorrow's Schools (Minister of Education, 1988).

The Picot Report proclaims "choice" as the first of its core values and states that this "will involve providing a wider range of options both for consumers and for learning institutions" (Taskforce, 1988: 4). Moreover, they "see the creation of more choice in the system as a way of ensuring greater efficiency and equity" (ibid). The report begins by describing "the present administrative structure" as one which is "over-centralised" and has "too many decision points" such that "almost everyone feels powerless to change things they see need changing" (Taskforce, 1988: xi). Thus, the Report states that:
Choice will involve providing a wider range of options both for consumers and for learning institutions .... Only if people are free to choose, can a true co-operative partnership develop between the community and learning institutions. (Taskforce, 1988: 4)

The discourse of the Picot Report is very similar to that of the 1987 Treasury Brief to the Incoming Government, entitled Government Management. This is an impressive document, comprising two volumes, and presenting an extensive set of neo-liberal economic and social policy proposals. The second volume is devoted entirely to education issues. As with the Picot Report, the promotion of parental choice is offered as a central rationale for decentralisation. Moreover, the document states that a key element in redressing problems of equity and efficiency "is empowering, through choice and through maximising information flows, the family, parent or individual as the customer of educational sources" (Treasury, Vol.2, 1987: 42).

In many ways, the Treasury document of 1987 provides a theoretical rationale for the educational reforms proposed in the Picot Report released a few months later. The following statement is a clear expression of the neo-liberal theory that informs many of these reforms:

... government intervention is liable to reduce freedom of choice and thereby curtail the sphere of responsibility of its citizens and weaken the self-steering ability inherent in society to reach optimal solutions through the mass of individual actions pursuing free choice without any formal consensus. (Treasury, Vol.2, 1987: 41)

This statement entails a deeply individualistic approach to social policy. All state intervention, in this view, is essentially bad, and all social goods are reduced to private goods that can be achieved only by individuals exercising rational choice within a free market (King, 1987). "Society" or the "public" has no definable features and therefore
no existence beyond the cumulative actions of individuals. Freedom to choose is no more than the absence of coercion or constraint by others.

This 'free market' ideology readily coheres with popular common sense beliefs about government interference in the lives of individuals. It becomes, therefore, a powerful source of legitimation. To this end, the Picot Report begins with a highly critical description of the education system, endorsing the popular belief that all bureaucracy is inherently and fundamentally bad. The Report suggests that the bureaucracy is largely self-serving and that most of the rules and procedures governing the allocation and use of resources exist only to frustrate or prevent decision-making at the level of individual institutions. It proposes, therefore, that as far as possible, all such rules and procedures should be abolished and each school board should be given discretion over how it spends its funds.

Thus, the rationale for decentralisation is that it produces greater flexibility and responsiveness, but it also produces a structure in which decisions can be more effectively controlled. There are clear parallels here with the 1988 British Education Act. McLean (1988) describes this as a structural change from corporatism to a new form of contractualism. It involves an extension into the domain of social policy of the same logic that lies behind monetarist or neo-liberal economic policy. It is a logic that produces what Offe (1985: 221-58) calls 'structural' policies in contrast to 'conjunctural' policies. Although they are legitimated by a discourse of neo-liberalism, the practical effects of such policies are to increase political and economic control.

A 'structural' policy, in Offe's (1985: 224) terms, is one that:

... follows the imperative of keeping output constant, that is at levels that are considered reasonable or affordable, while channelling demand inputs in a way that appears compatible with available resources.

Such policies are based upon a different form of political rationality from
the more common `conjunctural' policies which "seek to maximise the adequacy of policy responses to problems as they emerge and appear on the agenda" (ibid: 226). Policies to expand special education provisions, to reduce pupil/teacher ratios, to introduce bilingual schools, to increase student teacher support services, are all examples of `conjunctural' policies. Such policies have the effect of expanding existing administrative systems and increasing the level of involvement of the state.

Whereas `conjunctural' policies intervene in order to satisfy demands or anticipate developments, `structural' policies aim to shape and channel demands "so as to make them satisfiable". Structural policies, according to Offe (1985: 226):

... are adopted in response to conditions of economic and institutional crises.
In response to such crises, the physical and economic parameters of production and the institutional parameters of interest representation, which together constitute the nature of the problem, become subject to redesign. The shift is from policy output and economic demand management to the shaping of political input and economic supply - from 'state intervention' to 'politicisation'.

Thus, the defining features of these two types of state policy can be seen in the different political and economic strategies that each entails, and the different system and societal effects that each has (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

Two Types of State Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY TYPE</th>
<th>POLITICAL STRATEGY</th>
<th>ECONOMIC STRATEGY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONJUNCTURAL</td>
<td>satisfy demands</td>
<td>manage input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRUCTURAL</td>
<td>shape and channel</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to make them</td>
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<td></td>
<td>satisfiable</td>
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This analysis shows that recent education reform in New Zealand has all the essential features of `structural' policy. The main thrust of the restructuring is to reduce the size of the central bureaucracy, to abolish regional education boards, and to convert each learning institution into a self-managing unit having its own elected Board of Trustees. Schools are to be bulk funded and all advisory and teacher support services are to become `contestable'. Curriculum and teacher development initiatives are `contracted out' to a range of `private' or independent providers.

Thus, the new educational structure entails a devolution of decision-making in a wide range of administrative areas, including resource allocation, staff appointments, support services and staff development. Boards of Trustees are given some discretion in these areas but control is firmly invested in central state agencies, including the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office and the Qualifications Authority. This control is maintained through tightly circumscribed limits on local autonomy and contractual forms of accountability. Thus, the theory of neo-liberalism has generated a new set of institutional structures and practices.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the significance of key policy texts and official documents in the New Zealand education reforms. In particular, it has examined the neo-liberal discourse of those texts and shown how the institutional practices circumscribed by that discourse are the result of structural changes within society and tensions within the state.
The paper challenges orthodox accounts of how policy texts function within the policy formation process. It rejects not only idealist approaches to policy analysis in which texts are interpreted as expressions of political intention, but also more radical approaches in which policy texts are taken to be vehicles for the transmission of a dominant ideology. An alternative materialist account is then presented in which it is argued that policy texts are constructed by state agents who are always located within a particular set of political and economic conditions. These texts are then decoded by social actors located within a range of different social contexts.

Thus, the discourses of educational policy are constrained and shaped by the structural context in which they are produced, rather than being somehow constitutive of that context. Drawing on the work of Offe concerning the internal dynamics of the capitalist welfare state, the argument is illustrated with reference to the way in which neo-liberal educational discourse can be considered to be a manifestation of tensions between the structural components of the state.

The third section of the paper examines the specific nature of selected policy texts in the New Zealand education reforms. These texts are shown to contain the language of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on contractualism, contestability and choice, while also endorsing policies and institutional practices that are more concerned with management and control.

References


