

Improving outcomes for young people from low-income households.

In this submission I would like the Commission to think seriously about our young people and how they have been affected by the social, educational and employment changes brought about by the free-market philosophy that has dominated the politics of Aotearoa of the past 30 years. I submit that these changes have broken the promises and destroyed the expectations that were evident for those living and growing up in Aotearoa in the post war period; that these changes have affected low income, Māori and Pacifica youth to a greater extent than those in more affluent households and that, if we cannot go back, our moving forward must fill this gap. Essentially, if we want to be productive, we must ensure equitable opportunities for all.

The introduction to my PhD research thesis (Towl, 2013) stated that “the most significant and practical contribution we can make to the lives of young people is to ensure they stay in school” (p.1). However simple and obvious this aspiration appears to be it inhabits a complex environment of competing social and political voices. My research found that this landscape, with the inception and acceptance of market forces in education, is even more complex than it was in the past for those young people from low SES households who are male, Māori, Pacifica or with special education needs. The outcome of this complex yet essentially hidden debate is a widening gap between who does or who doesn’t get the opportunity, not only for a satisfying job and a livable income, but also for a say in the future of Aotearoa. Furthermore, the literature review for my research suggested that this outcome was intentional: that the New Right of the late 80s saw an opportunity and took it: effectively ring fencing the best outcomes for their own children to the detriment of the rest.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry “A fair chance for all” provides an opportunity to examine the impact of free market education on the lives of our children and their families. (Apple, 2006) writing about free market education described it as a system that enables winners and that where there are winners there must also be losers. We want all of our young people to be winners, surely? What have been the outcomes, therefore, of the education experiment of the late 80s, early 90s in Aotearoa that went further than anywhere else in the world? (Lauder and Hughes, 1999). Has it benefited all of the children of Aotearoa or as I suggest established a two-tier community of learners and achievers with an even more impenetrable glass ceiling than before? With this inquiry we have an opportunity to investigate education disadvantage and its impact on the longer timescales of young people’s lives. Is it reasonable that young people from low SES neighborhoods and schools appear to have different patterns of qualifications and employment opportunities from those from wealthier areas and, if not reasonable, what can we do about it?

I believe the terms of reference for this inquiry should examine whether market driven education does disadvantage life outcomes for certain sections of our community and investigate ways to re-level the playing field. That link between education and employment, so fixed in the past, appears to have been severed. Staying in school is not only about expectation it is also about getting to know and be known in the system. Growing up in a work poor family in the 60s the school expected me to go to university. Fees were cheap and I was paid to go to Teachers’ College. The outcome of this has been that I am still employed in my 70s and both of my children went on to tertiary education and have well paid and satisfying careers. Can we say, honestly, that the same applies to all young people growing up in Aotearoa now? Currently I teach in the Far North in low decile schools where the students are predominantly Māori. Wages are low, work is scarce and permanent employment positions even rarer. Yet the students are magic: clever, creative, friendly, kind and practical. They

are just the sort of people we need to have their voices heard and their skills utilized in a productive and equitable society. Visits from universities, however, are scant if at all. Those employers who traditionally took on and trained our rural youth appear to have a love affair with already trained and compliant immigrant workers. They say that New Zealanders don't want to work on farms and in orchards but do not appear to try to make it happen. Students are encouraged into the armed forces and trades though it would appear that the predominant outcomes for the majority of these magic youngsters is low paid, temporary or casual work in hospitality, retail or manual labour, if they can get work at all. Temporary, casual, low paid employment does not feed into career opportunities and productive high wage livable futures. Yet many of our young people are led to believe that this is their future if they live in the Far North. I believe the Commission's terms of reference should examine the patterns of career advancement for young people especially from low-income areas. One outcome could be a way to make every employment opportunity a career pathway to a better future. A tertiary pathway still appears to ensure a better outcome for young people so has free access to those pathways changed in the free market environment? What are the challenges faced by low-income young people going to tertiary especially from depressed rural communities?

A more sinister pathway for young people who don't believe they have a worthwhile future in Aotearoa heads towards drug taking, crime and involvement in gangs. I am concerned particularly with our young men in the Far North as I see a cohort in each year group lose interest in education. The pattern begins about year 7 and progresses through to early exit without qualifications and even fewer job prospects. In over fifty years in teaching this pattern has always existed but in the past these (mostly) lads who see no future in education have picked up work at the school leaving age and then ten years later they have a steady job often with the same employer. These patterns have changed in the recent past and where we might not have had anything to offer these young people in education it now appears we have nothing to offer them in employment either. I believe if we have nothing to promise our young people the outcomes for us all will be more tragic than we can imagine. If we want our young people to continue in education, we must offer them pathways that are visible and doable. The pathways to drugs, crime and gang membership are clearly lit and wide despite the precipice at the end; the pathway to a livable future, however, for our magic young people of the Far North is full of brambles and potholes where the architects and gardeners appear to have fallen asleep.

What I am looking for from this submission is a careful look at how we define and enable membership through education for our young people in Aotearoa, especially those from low income and disadvantaged communities. Can we really expect our young people to continue to strive if we have nothing to offer them in return? Young people learn no matter what we do. I want them to learn that living in Aotearoa promises a sustainable and livable future for all. If all of our young people are confident that their dreams and futures matter to those who have the power to help them make them happen, worries about productivity could become a thing of the past.

To that end, therefore:

1. Should we have better and clearer career education and pathways for our young people?
2. Should career education become a compulsory subject for all students at school years 7-13?
3. How can we better encourage and support all of our young people to enter tertiary not just those whose parents already know the system and how it works?
4. Should all employment have clear career pathways to a livable future even those that are temporary or casual?
5. If we emphasize career pathways should there be a worthwhile job at the end?

Productivity Commission Submission: A Fair Chance for All?

If the promises we made to our young people in the past are no longer relevant: i.e. a satisfying job, home ownership and a livable future, what are the promises we are prepared to make now and do they provide a fair chance for all?

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission

Kia manawanui

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