Future Liabilities: Solutions to the ‘problem of welfare’?

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Abstract

This article offers a case-study of specific shifts in the view of state responsibility for the less fortunate in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Current welfare policy aims to reduce the state benefits of parents if they do enrol their preschool children in an early childhood centre. I undertake a genealogical investigation and suggest that state anxieties about the disadvantaged are not new: Edu-welfare policies are the last in a long line of attempts to govern state beneficiaries and their children. Economic policies which arose in the specific historical, political and social contexts of the United States, I argue, should not be uncritically imposed as universal solutions to perceived risks to the body politic of other states.

Keywords: early childhood education, education policy, critical theory, multiculturalism, philosophy of education

Introduction

The New Zealand (NZ) government views unemployed welfare recipients as state ‘dependants’. This article offers a genealogical examination of a ‘problem of the present’: welfare cost to the state of state benefits. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nations sought security: knowledge of the national territory and populations within its borders (Foucault, 1997). Disciplinary societies, liberal states, like NZ, use institutions such as schools, as ways of managing individuals; to mould them in the images of society’s norms. Those individuals and groups who fall outside the norm, are those the state seeks to discipline.

A major focus of liberal state policies in the twentieth century was to enhance national wealth. In the twenty-first century the problem of welfare, of reducing costs to the state, is a critical focus. Human Capital Theory constructs the individual as entrepreneurially marketing their skills in the employment market-place. Skills acquired by training are an individual private good, like any other tradable good. Using foresight, in this theory, individuals may avoid poverty and the stigma of welfare, by gaining employment skills for both themselves and their young children. A NZ government welfare policy Social © 2014 The Author(s). Published by Routledge. This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The moral rights of the named author(s) have been asserted.
Assistance (Future Focus) Act (2010) utilizes early childhood education (ECE) to further the Human Capital of both the parents and their child-as-future citizen. Such policy is the subject of the following genealogical exploration which explores the power amassing to the economic discourse of child development.

New Zealand Edu-welfare Reform: A ‘Problem of the Present’

NZ governments have long been concerned about children who were not attending early childhood centres, either because their families were itinerant, or did not value preschool education. The Labour Coalition Government (1999–2008) had an initial policy called ‘Closing the gaps’ (1990); both governments: Labour and National Coalitions (2008–present) sought increased early childhood participation, through short-term contracts devolved to community groups. Present National Social Development Minister Paula Bennett plans policies to get ‘hard to reach’ children (Ministry of Social Development [MSD], 2012b) into ECE. The National Party election manifesto stated that the party hoped to reduce the number of beneficiaries by ‘between 28,000 and 44,000 by 2016/17’ (MSD, 2012a). Beneficiaries (with the exception of elderly pensioners) are now redefined as ‘job-seekers’. Sanctions and compliance testing may be applied to state beneficiaries with young children if they do not attend ECE for a minimum of 15 hours a week. Enrolment in an early childhood centre, policy-makers believe, will support the children to become increasingly independent; with good educational foundations to gain marketable skills, and decrease the likelihood of becoming adult beneficiaries themselves.

Early Sites of Judgement

Such sanctions are not new, but the tying of benefit-payments to civic expectations around parenting are. Treasury noted (MSD, 2012c, para. 27, p. 6) that ‘[w]hile social and parental obligations [are] are new in the New Zealand context [however] they have been used and evaluated in overseas jurisdictions.’ Conservative governments across the Western world have sought expert advice on economical ways to grow the national economy and lift their state’s competitive trading advantages. By the 1980s supra-national agencies such as the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were using Human Capital Theory advisors and disseminating their ideas to their members (Marginson, 1997).

In the United States, President Clinton introduced a 1996 Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, intended to limit the risk to federal coffers of immigrant illegal labour, and long-term beneficiaries. The effect of this act was that there were:

(1) increases in financial incentives to work;
(2) mandatory work-related activity requirements, sanctions if requirements are not met, and time limits on cash-assistance receipt;
(3) increased availability of child-care subsidies;
(4) a different environment and culture at welfare offices stressing work and personal responsibility. (Loprest, Schmidt, & Witte, 2000, p. 157)
A number of US states introduced harsh welfare measures. Many of these policies impacted differentially on groups: with a ‘growing body of research reveal[ing] that seemingly race-neutral procedures lead to racialized outcomes’ (Segal, 2012, p. 33). Later I argue that similar outcomes may arise in the NZ Edu-welfare contexts.

Economic rationales include understandings that education is a market where resources are allocated efficiently. While ECE is a private ‘good’, yet low-income parents operate in an imperfect market. At their stage in life their inadequate incomes and borrowing restraints limit their ability to purchase the education they may wish for their young children. States may thus consider investing to support the wider society:

Benefits of quality child care accrue to other members of society, including … taxpayers, who are likely to save in costs of future schooling … employers, who benefit from more productive employees; and citizens, who gain in terms of future reductions in crime … Subsidizing child care for low-income families is also consistent with the goals of the 1996 welfare reform and an ideology that wishes to encourage and reward work. (‘Debate. Social Responsibility’, 1998)

Despite ECE being a private good, it may be, Human Capital theorists argue, a short-term, cost-effective use of state monies, especially if targeted at needy populations.

‘Skills Beget Skills’: Investing in Training

Like the Head Start early childhood centres, the Highscope/Ypsilanti Perry Preschools emerged from the context of President Johnson’s 1964 ‘war on poverty’. Perry Director David Weikart was in a position to do research on the educational outcomes of his preschool programmes (e.g. Weikart, 2000; Schweinhart et al., 2010). Many of the subjects of the research were from poor Black families (Weber, Foster, & Weikart, 1978) who became part of longitudinal research. Weikart plotted outcomes over many decades from his randomly assigned groups of young children. His model has been described as ‘the gold standard’ of educational research (Schweinhart et al., 2010) and has been used to argue for the cost: benefit of state investments in ECE. The evidential ‘laws’ of the science of education have underpinned its validity for policy.

James Heckman, a micro-econometrician has made extensive use of Weikart’s data to plot the success of ECE in addressing disadvantage successfully. He has used neurological and developmental studies in his publications to assert that rather than a racial divide, the divide in contemporary America is a skill split (Heckman, 2011). Heckman is of interest to welfare policy in NZ because of his influence across supra-national agencies such as the OECD, and their advice to member countries about microeconomic policy. His research has become widely quoted and embedded in many government policy initiatives internationally. Heckman, utilizing Highscope/Ypsilanti longitudinal data suggested that childhood was not merely one period in the individuals’ life trajectory. Neuro-developmental theory, animal and child development studies showed that there were critical periods for intervention (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006). The early childhood period was one of these critical periods when educational intervention showed life-long results, Heckman maintained.
Disadvantage remains a major social problem with ‘the increased probability of adverse outcomes … leading to diminished economic success and decreased quality of life in adulthood’ (Knudsen et al., 2006, p. 10155). Parents can leave their young children in quality preschools, and have time to retrain. Their children meanwhile gain cognitive and social skills, which pay future dividends when they become capable employees. ‘Skills beget skills’ (Heckman, 2012). The science of microeconometrics has shown that:

Investing in disadvantaged young children is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Early interventions targeted toward disadvantaged children have much higher returns than later interventions. (Heckman, 2006, p. 1902)

Heckman (2012) and colleagues (e.g. Shonkoff & Bales, 2011) see their role as influencing government policy. ‘Science plays an important role in advising policymakers on how to effectively respond to social problems pertaining to the development of children’ (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011, p. 1). Despite critics suggesting that ‘[t]his is politics disguised as science’ (Bruer, 2011, p. 12) their advocacy has been especially effective.¹ Jack Shonkoff is director of the Harvard Centre of the Developing Child. Together the economic and neuro-developmental ‘truths’ form a discourse which now underlies ECE (e.g. OECD, 2012; Zero to Three, n.d.; World Health Organization, n.d.). Many assert that intervention in the early years, especially for disadvantaged children is both efficient and cost effective (e.g. OECD, 2007; UNICEF, 2008).

Human Capital Theory emerged in the US, but with the work of Heckman, and others it has fused with other disciplines, to be offered to other countries as a scientific universal truth. It is largely these theories that underlie the NZ National Government’s policies on vulnerable children and ECE for their parents.

**Workfare for (Some) New Zealand Parents**

Workfare ideas have been initiated by Western conservative governments (see Butler, 2012, on the Cameron government in Britain) in the past three decades, but had never been acceptable in NZ. Welfare at the turn of the twentieth century had included strong moral judgements about the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’. NZ society, after World War II however, had viewed welfare, like other social measures as a ‘public good’, the responsibility of a civil society.

There was a shift in both economic and social understanding in the 1980s. The Fourth Labour Government (1984–1990) adopted neoliberal economic ideas. New Public Management actuarial ideas including Human Capital Theory entered governmental discourses (See Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004). Now, it was largely accepted that the individual was responsible for his or her circumstances. Education sites were viewed as independent ‘firms’ in a market, competing for clients, and funding. It was with the education reforms of Tomorrow’s schools, Education to be more, Before five and the Education Act 1989 that the market ideas entered NZ.

Although successive governments, both Labour and National, continued with these economic practices, it was the latter that viewed beneficiaries, especially sole parents as
social risks. The National Coalition Government (1998) had trialled a *Code of social responsibility* an attempt at civic consultation with the electorate, on moral matters.² That government required recipients of the Domestic Purposes Benefit to seek work when their youngest child turned 14 years; to ‘step up the emphasis on paid work as a means of achieving personal economic and social independence’ (Shipley, cited in ‘Debate. Social Responsibility’, 1998). The Labour Coalition (1999–2008) brought in a Working for Families supply-side tax measure for parents in paid work, which subsidized early child enrolments—measures designed to stimulate economic growth. Both governments emphasized the morality of paid work and implemented policies derived from international economic theory. However, there was a significant shift when, in 2008, the National Coalition regained office.

Minister of Social Development and Employment, Paula Bennett, in her first term of office, introduced a public–private partnership with Job Support and Industry Partnership Programme Schemes where private employers taking on young staff would get government subsidies. On the 30 March 2010, she launched her party’s Future Focus welfare policy. Unlike their predecessor, Labour, who had encouraged a welfare as ‘an entitlement and a right’ attitude, her government expected beneficiaries to seek work. ‘We have a responsibility to those who are on welfare … to give them the support they need so they aren’t consigned to a lifetime of limited choices and limited potential’ (Bennett, 2010; see too Joyce & Bennett, 2010). Policy was to reduce benefits of those refusing jobs. The 2011 Welfare Working Group was charged to investigate an investment based approach [which took] a long-term view of each individual given their needs, challenges and prospects of a quick return to work. ‘This approach forces the Government to spend taxpayers’ money where it will have the biggest impact’. (Bennett, 12 September 2012)

Government took advice from Taylor & Fry, an Australian actuarial firm which gave cautious approval to the policy (Taylor & Fry, 2012). Not all policy advisors were positive. Basic flaws, critic Simon Chapple argued, included the ‘problem identification … [and] understanding core economics’ (Chapple, 2013, p. 61). The concept of forward liability, an accounting mechanism was not a good proxy for positive employment outcomes. The Ministry of Social Development Chapple concluded was ‘overly focused on easier-to-place beneficiaries’ (2013, p. 60) at the expense of others.

Economic lexicon is evident in a number of government documents: the *White Paper on Vulnerable Children* and the Children’s Commissioners *Expert Report*, as well as the Report on the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor (Gluckman, 2011). The economic uses of risk as defined by Human Capital Theorists dominate many of these reports. The most succinct statement is based on strong evidence, we are convinced that an investment approach will reap the greatest benefits. Such an approach involves giving preference to those policies which generate the largest long-term returns, both for children and our wider society. There is considerable evidence … that investments in the early years of a child’s life generate the greatest marginal benefits. To quote the Nobel laureate James Heckman (2006, p. 3), ‘It is a rare public
policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children is such a policy.’ (Boston & McIntosh, 2012, p. 29)

Together with suggestions for tax-credits, training to enhance parents’ skills, is the suggestion that the government ‘investigate and implement a public–private-partnership micro-funding model with the banking sector and community groups … [F]or a very modest government investment, the private banking and voluntary sector can make this a success’ (Boston & McIntosh, 2012, p. 36).

The Minister’s welfare reform came into effect in July 2013. All benefits have been amalgamated, with the Job-seeker benefit which focuses on beneficiaries applying for jobs. Those who turn down job offers will have their benefits progressively reduced. Beneficiaries with dependent children are expected to enroll them in Well-child and ECE programmes. Commenting on the effects of these reforms, Bennett agreed that it would force beneficiaries to enroll their children, in what had, till now, been a voluntary option. ‘I don’t think that every child actually needs to be in early childhood education, but I do think it benefits those that are most vulnerable so much, that that’s why I’m doing this’ (APNZ, 2012). All the reports, including the Government’s Taskforce Report on Early Childhood Education (TRECE, 2011) note a significant concern with Ma¯ori and Pasifika children, whose educational, health and economic outcomes are falling behind the norm. They also suggested fiscally neutral impacts by targeting services to such population groups (TRECE, 2011, p. 14). ‘High quality early childhood education can make a lasting difference and act as a protective factor for children at risk’, they asserted (TRECE, 2011, p. 43). Prevention means early intervention for the sake of ‘individual and collective wellbeing’ (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013, p. 14).

The Welfare Working Group suggested that ‘at-risk families should have access to quality early childhood education and childcare services from 18 months of age’ (Rebstock, 2011, p. 20). Targeting resources would support hard-to-reach families to access ECE (Rebstock, 2011, p. 20). The Ministry of Education has changed its focus under the National Coalition. Tracking of children through a unique identifier number has been introduced (Parata, 2013). For-profit groups can apply to the pool if setting up groups in hard-to-reach areas under the Targeted Assistance for Participation programmes (Parata, 2012). Changes in groups seeing ECE as a site for profit has been evident (see Table 1)

Peter Gluckman’s (2011) report Improving the Transition uses data from a number of Heckman’s writings to advocate for ECE as a cost-effective investment

A large body of evidence suggests that many adolescent difficulties … have their antecedents in early childhood. Increased recognition that these early years lay the foundation for future development has led to investment in evidence-based prevention and treatment programmes for preschool-age children and their families. (Gluckman, 2011, p. 9)

The discourse of ECE as palliative to mitigate social risk is in opposition to other discourses such as those pertaining to such education as a ‘right’ (May 2005; Te One, 2011). Rights are sites of contestation, whose rules are delineated by power. Politics is
in fact a continuation of war, the civil institutions the ‘motor’ of the state (Foucault, 1997, p. 50). Political leaders adopted the ‘war’ analogy in the 1960s, and constructed early intervention as strategy to overcome poverty, and mitigate tensions in US society. While the early Human Capital Theorists suggested measures that penetrated the private domain of the family, later theorists have entered the ECE domain, arguing that skills taught early will mitigate any future liability of unemployment. NZ is merely one site of liberal government implementation of future-focused policies grounded in economic rationalities. Paid work, skill-enhancement and being job-ready have been re-defined, by recent National Coalition welfare policies as actuarial strategies.

Management of the Mind?

Human Capital Theory discourse of the twenty-first century has advocated intervening early to grow the mind of future workers. Beneficiary-parents may be presently problematic; however, advice is that targeting Edu-welfare monies in ECE is a ‘future-forward’ mitigation of risk. Predicated on this is an assumption that the job-market is ever-expanding, and that unemployment is an issue of individual attitude, rather than a societal structural issue. A genealogical interrogation of economic discourse can reveal the relations of power, and locate the uncertainties of this science.

Using recent NZ Edu-welfare policy as an example, I have argued that economic policies which arose in the specific historical, political and social contexts of the United States should not be uncritically imposed as universal solutions to perceived risks to the body politic of other nation states.
Notes

1. Bruer (2011, p. 12) maintains that ‘the authors and papers cited in the mid- to the late 1990s are the same authors and papers being cited in current policy reports. The same over-generalizations and over-simplifications that appeared then are appearing now.’

2. Householders were invited to respond to societal issues and expectations, such as that people ‘receiving income support will work full-time or part-time ... or take steps to improve their chances of getting a job’ (Department of Social Welfare, 1998, p. 23).

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