Toward a knowledgeable society?

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"THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY" is a recent political slogan. It sounds like a good idea. Education is implicated because teachers are seen as contributing to knowledge, to what people know. But the word "society" in this slogan is also important. Since 1984 our major political parties and those who vote for them have emphasised a neoliberal New Right focus on the individual. Our communities and institutions are thought of in terms of self-seeking people making choices that will benefit themselves. Independence, not interdependence, is the new social and moral order. John Codd (1999) has suggested that in this context there is no such thing as "the public good" because there is no such thing as "society" (p. 46).

Along with this, New Zealand has adopted a commercial market model of human behaviour that pervades all sectors. While commerce and competition are a dynamic and often creative aspect of an economy, it is not necessarily the case that commercial values and procedures can deliver education, health, and social services on an effective and equitable basis. In our education system, for example, the market model has seen schools increasingly divided along socioeconomic and ethnic lines (Fiske & Ladd, 2000). There is increasing inequality of resources and a related decline in student performance in those schools that are the market losers in this competitive system (Harker, 1999). University of Waikato researcher Martin Thrupp (1998) has reported on "the perceived mandate" that markets give "to racism and breaking down the social fabric of communities" (p. 14).

Research by Charles Waldegrave and his colleagues (1998) on poverty and a loss of social cohesion in New Zealand reflects evidence that income inequality has grown more rapidly in New Zealand than in other OECD countries. A third of all New Zealand children and 72 percent of single-parent families live below the poverty line. The wellbeing of people who are poor, and through that the wellbeing of communities in general, might be improved by quality public services. But from their voting behaviour it would appear that the majority of New Zealanders do not want a taxation rate that would allow for an appropriately funded public health, education, and welfare system. In that case I think the idea of "society" warrants scrutiny.

A commitment to individualism and to a commercial market model also has implications for our working lives. The ideological belief that we are primarily motivated by self-interest carries with it the implication that we are not to be trusted. We need "incentives" to make us work. Our schools and other institutions must operate in an environment of marketplace contestability so that we must constantly be threatened to perform or perish, we must be watched and endlessly reviewed, assessed, and audited to ensure that the "purchaser" (employer, student, parent…) gets maximum ("efficient") and "quality" benefit from the "provider" (teacher, lecturer, principal…). Because people cannot be trusted, relationships must be contractual and written down. Engagement with others thus becomes a technical matter, one that is described in increasingly fine detail, requiring a particular technicist language of charters, governance, goals, objectives, strategies, profiles, and portfolios.

For some, this mechanistically prescribed world is alienating and excluding. Stephen Ball (1999) describes us as living in a "world of judgments…a performative society" (p. 1) in

which we are constantly watched, recorded, and evaluated, and in which our personal worth is the judged quality of our performance. Power resides with those who determine what is to comprise "quality". For teachers, this context has redefined what it means to be a teacher, and new identities are constructed within a discourse of objectivity, outcomes, and accountability.

In such a context, says Ball, there is an "emptying out of relationships" in which "authentic social relations are replaced by judgemental relations…" (p. 10). "Impression and performance" replace a teacher's sense of authentic professional work (p. 10). Constant auditing and evaluation create both a "spectacle" and a press toward fabrication (p. 11). As teachers become embedded in these concepts and practices, they may become compliant and self-regulating – surely the ultimate controlling achievement of seemingly endless assessments and reviews. Then, says Ball, "the heart of the educational project is gouged out and left empty. Authenticity is replaced by plasticity" (p. 16).

Some may take on the identity of the so-called new professionalism, serving the ideology and structures of globalised capital as managers of "learning outcomes". Some resist and subvert. But for others, performative institutions are alienating and dehumanising. They experience what sociologist Richard Sennett (1998) describes as the "corrosion of character" which emerges when commitment and responsibility (which are not the same as an externally monitored "accountability") are not valued. They will be lost from education, from health, and from other institutions – the very institutions that a knowledgeable society might be expected to rely on for the wellbeing of all.

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