

DR C.E. BEEBY

&

the quality of education

Geraldine McDonald

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Dr C.E. Beeby in 1902. When I joined the staff of NZCER in 1973, I got to know him personally. Before that I knew of him only as the Director of the New Zealand Department of Education, and a name on a slip of paper which informed me that I had passed School Certificate, an examination for which I did not know I had entered.¹

There are already some excellent books and essays outlining and assessing Beeby's work in education, and his own account was published when he was ninety.² I would like to explore some themes from his life and career, to relate his reform of education in New Zealand to aspects of my own life; and to discuss briefly his theories about education systems.

Beeby and change

As the Director of a national education system for 20 years, Beeby must have had some effect on everyone who went to school, taught in a school, or had children at school during those years. However, his importance lies not merely in the fact that he ran our education system for so long, but that he reformed it, to the chagrin of those who thought that standards were being threatened.

When Beeby died in 1998, his obituaries included accounts of controversies over teaching methods associated with his term of office. In particular, critics focused on something called "Beebyism" or "playway". Critics objected to child centred methods of teaching, including such mild permissiveness as "choosing time", "activity methods", the importance given to the arts, and an emphasis on teaching for understanding. These approaches incensed those who felt they had been successfully taught by rote, and who did not ask whether everyone else had succeeded by such methods.

None of the teaching methods attributed to

Beeby's influence were unique to New Zealand. They were part of a world-wide movement. The reforms were, by and large, supported by the teaching profession. NZEI, in particular, respected him to the end of his long life, and he never failed to respond to invitations to their gatherings. On the occasion of his 90th birthday in 1992, NZEI Te Riu Roa paid him a tribute which he greatly appreciated. The celebration was held in the foyer of Education House, where the walls display art work by primary school children. At one point a boy and a girl came forward to show Dr Beeby the things they had made in their technology class, and thanked him for his role in enabling them to learn to make things. He was being celebrated for the creativity in education which he had promoted so vigorously.

His career was not exactly one of rags to riches; but it was one in which the schooling he experienced, whatever its shortcomings, created a ladder of opportunity for a clever and ambitious boy from an immigrant family of working class origins to climb. But it did this in part by competitive examination, so that only the fittest were permitted to proceed to higher education. Judged by this standard, Beeby was extremely fit.

He had at first intended to become a lawyer, but in his first year of legal studies at Canterbury University College, he included Philosophy I. The course consisted of psychology and logic, a relic of times when disciplinary boundaries were unclear. "It was dull and formally taught", he wrote later, "but it was my first introduction to the world of ideas, of abstractions you could play with, manipulate, set face-to-face in ordered quadrille."³

His recognition that the lectures were uninspired made it more likely that he would respond, as did many others in Canterbury, to the charismatic James Shelley, who was

"missionary, iconoclast, actor, ebullient platform speaker...striking in appearance, he trailed a faint aura of mystery"⁴ when he arrived in Christchurch in 1920 as the first Professor of Education in a New Zealand university. Hooked on abstract and high-minded ideas, Beeby abandoned law to attend Christchurch Teachers College and study part-time at Canterbury University College. After gaining his doctorate in psychology in England, he was offered a position as Professor of Philosophy at Canterbury University College.

However, he had also applied for the position of Executive Officer of a new institution, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, to be funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Carnegie Corporation had taken upon itself the task of improving educational services in the countries of the Commonwealth. The foundation of NZCER followed the successful establishment of the Australian Council for Educational Research. Beeby won the NZCER position, and moved to Wellington in 1934. He led NZCER for four years, leaving a legacy of style, international contacts, and high quality publications.

As part of his work he organised, in 1937, the New Zealand sector of the highly influential New Education Fellowship (NEF) Conference. The NEF was a British organisation dedicated to progressive education.

Among the outstanding people brought to New Zealand, Susan Isaacs made perhaps the greatest impact. In England, she had established a school for young children using child centred and free play methods, and had written two books based on analysis of the thinking processes and the social and emotional behaviour of young children. She had studied psychoanalysis and believed in allowing children to express their feelings. She believed Jean Piaget had underestimated the reasoning

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powers of young children. Beeby knew her and respected her work and ideas. Through several routes, including their acceptance by Beeby, they have influenced early childhood and primary education in New Zealand.

When the first Labour government swept to power in 1935, Peter Fraser became Minister of Education, intent on reform and the achievement of equality of educational opportunity. The former standards system, which had placed barriers to promotion at the end of each school year, now existed only in a remnant, the dreaded "Proficiency" examination at the end of primary school. Free secondary education was available only to those who passed it. Beeby began his career as a civil servant with a supportive Minister, considerable knowledge of education both within New Zealand and overseas, and wide powers of decision.

Beeby abroad

Beeby's work extended well beyond the shores of New Zealand. He was leader of the New Zealand delegation to the foundation conference of UNESCO in Paris in 1947. The following year he took leave from the Department to serve as Assistant Director-

General of UNESCO in 1948-49. He worked for UNESCO in various capacities to the end of his active life, particularly in association with the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). After visiting Indonesia and Ceylon, Beeby arranged for New Zealand to offer assistance with teacher training under the Colombo Plan.

Following his retirement from the Department of Education, Beeby continued his international career, first as New Zealand's Ambassador to France, where he was able to continue his work with UNESCO, then as a research associate at Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Opportunity and quality in education

When, approaching 90, Beeby wrote about his career in education, he called his account *The Biography of an Idea*. He had to be persuaded to attach the subtitle *Beeby on Education*. In this work he developed the argument that the statement he drafted in 1939 to express the Labour government's policy on education, now known as the Fraser-Beeby statement, was an idea which "grew in his mind" and guided his work both in New Zealand and in developing countries. Famously, that statement began:

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted and to the fullest extent of his powers.

There is no doubt that Beeby followed his government's policy of expanding educational opportunity; that there was a similar demand in the developing countries in which he later worked; and that he was committed to this policy.

However, the driving force behind Beeby's reform of the New Zealand education system was not simply access and opportunity. What drove Beeby, I think, was his concern for quality in education, and his belief that this comes from the quality of the teachers.

In the 1960s, while at the Center for Studies in Education and Development at Harvard, he wrote a book called *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries*.⁵ The sub-text of his description of educational conservatism and the conflict between quality and expanding provision was that he had lived it all, at first hand, in New Zealand.

He acknowledged the popular demand for education, and the dilemma of quantity versus quality, but his focus in the book was on raising the quality. He believed that the key lay within the teaching force. His description of stages in the development of education systems takes the quality of teachers as the major indicator.

Stage theories were very popular in the 1960s, and it is not surprising that Beeby chose this as an analytic framework. He had also seen different degrees of quality in the education and training of teachers, beginning with his work in the Pacific Islands nations and, later, in a range of other developing countries.

In part, his emphasis on teachers and classrooms was a reaction to economists, who, according to Beeby's friend Philip Coombes, were "the high priests of national development".⁶ Beeby asked, "Is education still good if it fails to serve the economic goals of the community?"⁷ His answer was that education may need to be judged by social criteria which are broader than merely economic ones. The question, and his answer, seem just as relevant to New Zealand education today.

In his monograph, he concentrates on the achievement of quality in the classroom, and asks whether the child has been taught to think

and to show creativity and initiative. This was his approach to education in New Zealand. Beeby did not deny that money is needed. He knew very well that:

...it is a rare reform that does not involve changes in textbooks and teaching aids, new teachers' guides, extensive in-service training, and the appointment of a corps of supervisors to travel around the schools to iron out misconceptions and keep up the pressure for change.⁸

This is exactly what he had done in New Zealand when he transformed arts and crafts education, with help from outstanding people such as Doreen Blumhardt, Gordon Tovey, Philip Smithells, and Ruth Trevor.

He also built up the School Publications Branch, which employed real writers, real artists, real poets, and real editors.⁹ In 1975 I was asked to write a bulletin for School Publications. It was to be about the education of very young children in New Zealand, written in the form of a story. I did my best, guided and encouraged by Lois Thompson, a real editor, who checked every word and every punctuation mark. The text was illustrated by artist Christine Jarvis.

Beeby in person

Beeby was a man of great charm, particularly when he was before an audience or chairing a meeting. He had a seemingly endless supply of bon mots and enjoyed entertaining people. When, in later years, hearing aids were fitted to his spectacles, he found that by fiddling with their volume control he could play little tunes. He would come into the tearoom at NZCER and give a performance. It always reminded me of a duet by cicadas.

But he did not become an effective administrator simply through charm. Beeby had great respect for authority, both his own and that of others under whom he served, and he maintained good relationships with Ministers of Education whatever the party in power.

Noeline Alcorn reports that when he went to Harvard Graduate School of Education, Beeby found that he could not think in an office cut off from human contact. At the end of the working day at NZCER, he would wander through the offices to find a colleague who was available for conversation. He did not indulge in gossip or commentary on current events. He wanted to try out his latest thoughts on education.

Beeby was a highly effective administrator. Alcorn summed up his qualities as follows:

His genius was as an administrator. An articulate spokesman, he remained intent on working out the why and how of educational change. ... His intelligence was analytic, his creativity directed to implementation and action.¹⁰

Beeby reported that his Yorkshire mother had high ambitions for him. She named him "Clarence", possibly thinking that it would sound right if inserted into the phrase "Arise, Sir...". But he hated the name, and always used C.E. Beeby officially and "Beeb" for his friends.

Alcorn discusses why it took so long for Beeby to be honoured by his country. She thinks it likely that "the resentment of some of those he offended during his long period as Director of Education remained".¹¹ However, in 1987 he was made one of the five initial members of the Order of New Zealand. It was a higher honour than a knighthood, but alas, it did not carry the title of "Sir", so "Clarence" appears to have been wasted. What has not been wasted is the quality that Beeby built into the New Zealand education system during his time as Director.

Notes

- 1 This School Certificate was established by the Department in 1934. It was gained by passing subjects for Matriculation, the examination for entrance to university, but it allowed students to sit a wider range of subjects. It never caught on with the profession or the public.
- 2 N. Alcorn (1990). *To the fullest extent of his powers: C.E. Beeby's life in education*. Wellington: Victoria University Press; G. McDonald and R. Benton (eds) (1992), *The Beeby fascicles*, Wellington: Te Aro Press; C.E. Beeby (1992), *The biography of an idea: Beeby on education*, Wellington: NZCER.
- 3 Beeby (1992), p.36.
- 4 For an account of James Shelley, see I. Carter (1993), *Gadfly: The life and times of James Shelley*, Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- 5 C.E. Beeby (1996), *The quality of education in developing countries*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- 6 Coombes P. (1992), *The Beeby fascicles*, 1.
- 7 Beeby (1996), p. 11.
- 8 Beeby (1996), p. 33.
- 9 Richards L. (1992), *The Beeby fascicles*, 2.
- 10 Alcorn (1990), p. 370.
- 11 Alcorn (1990), p. 346.

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