

# TO THE SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION CONFERENCE

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## Abstract

Dame Anne Salmond suggests three areas in which New Zealand research and social policy might be profitably connected. To begin with she advocates evidence-based approaches to equity issues. Secondly she proposes we examine New Zealand's aspirations to be a fair and prosperous nation and, lastly, that we inquire into ways of giving our children a good life.

## INTRODUCTION

A wise person once said that there is one big difference between academia and politics: in politics, it's dog eat dog, while in academia, it's exactly the reverse. But of course this isn't really true. Academia is all about collegiality and co-operation, and it is in that spirit I offer my thoughts about how research and social policy may profitably be connected.

At the recent Knowledge Wave Conference, Professor John Hattie argued that teachers had a lot to learn from doctors. According to John, over the past 150 years medicine has evolved from a craft, based largely on intuition and guesswork, with a very low success rate (i.e. it killed most of its patients), to an evidence-based practice driven by the results of research. With this transformation, the efficacy of medicine has increased hugely.

But, he argued, teachers still operate with a craft model, their practice largely uninformed by research into the processes of thinking and learning, and the effectiveness of particular teaching strategies. Unsurprisingly their rates of success are often low, particularly for Māori, Pacific and low-income children.

John Hattie's argument also applies to the ways in which social policy is forged in this country. Social policies and strategies have often been devised and enacted without the benefit of systematic enquiry. Initiatives frequently go awry, or have unintended consequences. This is the craft model of practice at work, based on intuition and guesswork, rather than enquiry. An evidence-based approach might produce policies that actually achieve their intended goals: building a happier, more prosperous nation.

Part of the trick with research is to know what questions to ask. The interests of those at the receiving end of policies and strategies must be at the forefront of research into social issues. Ideology can get in the way of this process, shutting down awkward questions or suppressing uncomfortable findings. If evidence-based practice is to be ethical, honest and accurate, the interests of children (rather than teachers, or the Ministry of Education); of patients (rather than doctors, or the Ministry of Health); of Māori or Pacific people, or other New Zealanders (rather than civil servants, politicians or particular elites) must be kept paramount. Research should illuminate their aspirations, their perceptions, and how they are actually faring. Research should ask what strategies deliver better social and economic outcomes for them, trial initiatives in a systematic fashion, and report the results without fear or favour. The greatest challenge is then to act, based on evidence derived from systematic, honest enquiry.

There are three areas of contemporary social life in New Zealand where, in my view, evidence-based approaches to policy-making would make a huge difference. These are biculturalism or Treaty-based policy, New Zealand's aspirations to be a fair and prosperous society, and providing a good life for our children.

### TREATY-BASED POLICY

Biculturalism, or Treaty-based policy – the delivery of justice and a good life for Māori people – is an area of policy-making which is riddled with ideology, both non-Māori and Māori. Strategies are often claimed to be worthwhile in the absence of any convincing evidence, just because they suit someone's ideological position. Open and rigorous debate in this area has often been sidelined or suppressed, leaving poor outcomes unchallenged by systematic inquiry or robust criticism.

Evidence-based approaches might begin by investigating and documenting the aspirations of particular segments of the Māori population. Their perceptions, their actual and desired relationships with other New Zealanders, and the social and economic outcomes that currently shape their lives would form the basis of inquiry.

By getting away from large generalisations about Māori we would enrich and complicate our understandings of what it is to be Māori in New Zealand, or Australia or Europe, for that matter. It might reveal the things that most "Māori" have in common, while casting light upon socio-economic differentials, rural-urban differences, and the dynamics of intermarriage.

Strategies derived from this research might be aimed at improving current outcomes, and differentiated for different segments of the Māori population. After initiatives have been trialled and results rigorously assessed and reported, only those strategies that deliver real improvements would be supported long term, and only as long as they continue to deliver

good results. If we followed such an approach in education, for example, the delivery in most low-decile secondary schools and the entire tertiary system would come under serious question, since the outcomes for Māori are often truly awful. Instead we would be experimenting, looking for evidence-based alternatives that actually deliver good outcomes. Lasting employment and prosperity in a contemporary economy and society are for most Māori fundamental requirements. Strategies that cannot deliver this will only pile up more problems for future generations.

## ASPIRATIONS TO A FAIR AND PROSPEROUS SOCIETY

In New Zealand there is a strong egalitarian ideal, which works in a contradictory fashion. Sometimes it manifests itself as a bent towards conformity, resulting in “one size fits all” policies and institutions, a drive towards the lowest common denominator and distaste for success (except in sport). On other occasions it reveals itself in our sense of fair play and decency, which enriches civic life. Most Kiwis would agree, for instance, that every child in this country should have a fair chance of making a good life for themselves, but that is not what is happening at present.

Almost one in five students leave secondary school without any formal qualification, but for those counted as Māori the figure is one in three, and for Pacific students it is one in four. Education correlates strongly with economic success. University qualifications yield a 62% privilege in life-long earnings over all other tertiary qualifications. Given these educational disparities, it is not surprising to discover that the median income for Māori and Pacific peoples in the workforce is 80% of other workers.

Pacific Islanders and Māori have higher fertility rates than non-Polynesians, lower life expectancy, and a younger age structure, although Māori fertility rates are dropping. By 2050, 57% of all children in New Zealand will be identified as Māori or Pacific Islanders. As the baby boomers retire, they will find themselves relying upon an increasingly “Māori” and “Pacific” workforce to support them.

It is in all of our interests that young people acquire good skills in literacy and numeracy at school, and those with particular intellectual and creative gifts are enabled to aspire to higher education. However, for example, we find that there are sharply inequitable outcomes for third formers who entered various high schools in Auckland, with the children at some low-decile schools having 80 times less chance than those at the other end of the socio-economic scale of getting an A or B bursary; and thus no chance of gaining entry into those tertiary programmes which lead to high income jobs and the professions.

If we want a happy, prosperous future for our nation, the issue of improving educational outcomes for young people from low-income families is fundamental. One immediate goal might be to halve the number of children who leave school without any formal qualification. Researchers might investigate issues of excellence in teaching, as measured by improved learning for low-income children as well as others and how this excellence might be fostered and rewarded: for example, honest feedback to children and their parents, and to teachers, about their current levels of performance against national standards; and a willingness to expose children from all backgrounds to demanding subjects, taught superbly.

### A GOOD LIFE TO OUR CHILDREN

Another area of social policy that might profit from an evidence-based approach is how to give a good life to our children. If children are ill, tired, unhappy or hungry, it's difficult for them to learn. As recent OECD reports have made abundantly clear, New Zealand has a poor record in caring for its children. Child poverty has soared, fuelled by earlier economic reforms. Child benefits, unlike superannuation, are not indexed to the cost of living. Twenty-nine per cent of children in this country experience low living standards, compared with 7% of those aged over 65 years. Babies from homes with the lowest incomes suffer poor health; they are five times more likely to be admitted to hospital than those from well-off families. Third World diseases are increasing sharply in New Zealand, leaving victims permanently damaged. Rates for child mortality, deaths from child abuse, teenage pregnancy and teenage suicide are high by OECD standards. This is a national disgrace.

Child poverty translates into poor educational performance, high offending rates, severe health problems in adulthood, low incomes and high rates of reliance on welfare. Introduced exam charges at secondary schools deter children from low-income families from completing qualifications. Policy-makers congratulate themselves on increasing Māori and Pacific participation in tertiary education, resolutely ignoring the fact that most of this is in short-term training courses, not in those degrees that lead to high-income jobs or professions. When a student loan scheme was introduced in New Zealand, it was more punitive than a similar scheme across the Tasman (let alone the United Kingdom), and sent many young people overseas to repay their student loans.

If we want a prosperous knowledge society, where is the human capital going to come from? An ageing society that does not take care of its young has a death wish. In this area, research might focus on the causal factors, which include educational disparities, child benefits that have been so sharply targeted that the most needy can't access them, market rents for housing, and the difficulties faced by single-parent families. Successful international interventions should be investigated, as well as local initiatives. Here, an investment rather than a cost-recovery model is probably the most appropriate basis for policy making – certainly other

developed countries have used it successfully. Why not index child benefits to the cost of living, and make them universal? How about relief on student loans for graduates who stay and contribute in areas of skill shortages, or citizenship for highly qualified international students?

At present we are facing some formidable social challenges, partly as the result of past ideological adventures. The marvellous thing about New Zealand, however, is that this is a small, innovative society, with high levels of collective aspiration. Our egalitarian ideals are deeply rooted, forged by people who came here to make a better life for themselves, and their children.

Māori ancestors voyaged to escape war in island homelands, or to see what was over the horizon. In the case of European settlers, most were determined to leave behind the radical inequalities and injustices of life in Europe. Our ancestors were curious, ambitious and courageous; we should be likewise.

In a small society almost anything is possible. With insightful questions, research can get to grips with the issues and the data can be managed. Integrity among researchers and those who commission research, high standards of enquiry, and generosity of spirit can work wonders, changing people's lives for the better. Let's resolutely confront the tough issues so that our children and children's children may live together in peace and prosperity.