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Constructed Patriotism: Shifting (Re)Presentations and Performances of Patriotism through Curriculum Materials

Nina Hood and Marek Tesar

What does it mean to be patriotic? How are notions of patriotism (re)presented and performed in curriculum materials? In attempting to answer these questions, we contend that it is necessary to move beyond the word *patriotic* as an isolated concept to explore it in relation to specific temporal, geographic, political, economic, and institutional contexts. Patriotism, or to be patriotic, is conceptualized and means something quite different—and manifests differently—in different eras and in different countries.

We utilize curriculum materials and documents as a lens through which to explore different conceptions and manifestations of patriotism as they pertain to the education of children in two very different national and historical contexts: communist central European Czechoslovakia of the 1970s and 1980s and contemporary New Zealand in the deep South Pacific. Patriotism in education in Czechoslovakia of the 1970s and 1980s took the form of positioning oneself loyal to one block (communist or non-communist) or another (enemy vs. non-enemy). In contrast, this form of nationalistic patriotism is largely absent from contemporary New Zealand education where, at least as it is conceptualized in educational policy, there is, as Roberts (2009) suggests, a “new patriotism” focused on success in the global economy. This new patriotism of contemporary New Zealand is more global and neoliberal in nature and stands in distinct contrast to the first-world, second-world structure of the patriotism visible in communist Czechoslovakia.

On the surface, comparing representations of patriotism in the education systems and curriculum materials of two such different times and countries may seem rather arbitrary. Indeed, as described above, the (re)presentation and performance of patriotism in each context is remarkably different. However, utilizing disparate case studies provides an added layer of depth to our understanding of both the mutability and context-rich nature of patriotism and being patriotic. Further, we see how differently patriotism is presented and performed in educational curricula and, by extension, how differently patriotism infiltrates the education, development, and entire lives of children.

The choice of these contexts is also a personal one. Marek grew up in communist Czechoslovakia; Nina grew up in New Zealand as it was transitioning to a neoliberal ideology and its new patriotism. However, both of us left our respective homelands on the cusp of adulthood and experienced education systems and societies in other nations and, in doing so, gained a certain distance—geographic, temporal, ideological—from the educational and ideological systems of our childhoods.

This essay links the very different geographies, histories, and ideologies of our respective homelands and the very different ways in which performances and (re)presentations of patriotism are perceived and utilized in education and everyday mundane experiences. As such, it is an essay in two halves. The first is a close reading of children’s stories from forty years ago. The second is a birds-eye view of how policy documents shape an educational agenda and its enactment in a contemporary country context.

The focus, tone, and treatment of each section is deliberately different. This difference reinforces the mutability and contextual nature of patriotism, which is always informed by political, social, economic, geographical, and historical contexts.

Fighting Dragons with Tanks: Patriotism in Communist Czechoslovakia

The Iron Curtain represented polarized states, clear black-and-white divisions, within which it was easy to understand political subjectivity and patriotism. Large-scale country blocks were united by common beliefs that operated apparently under similar ideologies. It was clear that if a patriot was to love her/his land and country, s/he must somehow position herself/himself into a meaningless binary between these two blocks, where citizens were to fear, misunderstand, or hate each other. Within both blocks, it was clear who and what children should love and adore—and who and what they should hate. Marek, as a child attending school, learned from the outset to love his homeland—to be patriotic, to feel intensely for his country and its associated ideology.

In communist Czechoslovakia the education curriculum was heavily prescribed. Even at the kindergarten level, curriculum materials were developed by the state and issued to every school as a means of controlling and shaping children's understanding of political ideology and power. Patriotism was embedded in the kindergarten curriculum materials, most notably children's stories. To demonstrate the nature of this patriotism, the remainder of this section provides a close study of a children's magazine, *Vcielka* (translated to *Little Bee*). It was distributed to all kindergartens in Czechoslovakia with the understanding that teachers would read and discuss the stories with their students. Marek has clear memories of reading it in kindergarten.

Curriculum materials represented children in Czechoslovakia as active supporters of the country, as young patriots. One way this was done was through messages that portrayed soldiers and weapons as necessary for happy and peaceful childhoods. Peace was advanced as the ultimate goal of Czechoslovakia and every citizen, including children, contributed to it through their "work." Children's work entailed learning, playing, making art, and performing. Through these activities, children were exposed to the notion that peace could be protected through engagements with soldiers or border patrols. They also learned that peace was to be celebrated, through marches, drawings, drama performances, and plays.

After the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, undertaken in response to the attempted reform efforts of the Prague Spring, *Little Bee* presented stories of tanks and soldiers as positive forces that children should celebrate and admire. The half million Soviet soldiers and tanks sent to crush the Prague Spring and occupy Czechoslovakia were cast as friends and protectors who had liberated the country from fascism in World War II and who had supported the children's homeland in its development ever since. According to *Little Bee*, the Soviet army, with its tanks, artilleries, and machine guns, had the best interests of the children in mind. For example, the story, "9th of May," which celebrates the victory in World War II, describes city streets filled with posters and flags as thousands of people come to celebrate: "Glory, glory to all the soldiers, all artillery and all tanks," as all citizens now live in "freedom and peace" (*Little Bee*, 1973, p. 11).¹

¹ All *Little Bee* references refer to the volume/issue of the archival document of *Little Bee*. Archival documents of *Little Bee* available in: Archive of Univerzitna Kniznica in Bratislava, Slovakia. *Little Bee* was written in Slovak, however, for the purposes of this paper all quotes have been translated by the author into English.

Little Bee introduced children to “Army Day” and encouraged them to honor the army. In text written in the form of a play, kindergarten children sing the praises of the soldiers and the army in a celebration of peace (*Little Bee*, 1974). The kindergarten children “are preparing to celebrate the Czechoslovak army. They like to play like soldiers; they have their toy weapons such as wooden rifles and paper hats on their heads. At the front of the line of children stands a boy, holding a trumpet” (p. 6). The children were expected to recite stories and poems, such as: “We are brave kindergarten children, we like to play, and today we will sing a song to our soldiers. We have hidden our dreams and our desires in a poem, and those who want to know more, need to walk with us” (p. 6). In the poem, children are grateful to all soldiers, but at the same time they wish for peace around the world and for nothing to fight for.

Children were encouraged to say hello “to all soldiers with pink cheeks, who protect our homeland and stay awake, so you can go to the kindergarten and sleep easily through the night. Thank you our soldiers!” (p. 2). Children could practice their knowledge about the army, for example in the game of “misplaced pictures,” where the objective was to identify the mixed-up uniforms of different types of soldiers (*Little Bee*, 1977d).

Soviet soldiers were also featured in the stories that used fairy-tale notions, for example in the tale of the Soviet soldier Kolja and his arrival on a white horse to liberate Czechoslovakia (*Little Bee*, 1975b). In the story, the Soviet army arrives in a village and all the children fall in love with Kolja. They follow him everywhere and Kolja takes four children at once for a ride on the white horse. Despite the children’s protests and pleas, Kolja has to leave to fight fascism elsewhere: “We have to move on fighting. We must continue in our fight, so all people and children are free” (p. 5).

In this fairy tale, the Soviet soldiers are described as people with “smiling faces with beautiful red stars on their hats” (p. 4) and their relationship with children is central. The picture that accompanies the story shows a brave soldier on a white horse, emphasizing purity and goodness, fighting against the evil monster. The monster is often portrayed as a dragon, with Soviet soldiers as fairy-tale princes fighting against it with their tanks and flowers to free the homeland, which is portrayed as a little princess (*Little Bee*, 1975a; see Image 1). The children in one fairy-tale poem promise that “we are bringing flowers and our children’s happiness” (p. 6) to the memorial of Soviet soldiers.



Image 1. Soviet soldier as the fairy-tale prince slaying the dragon (*Little Bee*, 1975a, p. 6)².

2 The images of *Little Bee* are not subjected to copyright.

Little Bee also presented children with the brutalities associated with war. The poem “Ilja” graphically describes the death of a Soviet soldier in Czechoslovakia during World War II, with a detailed description of blood and his wounds (*Little Bee*, 1975c). This poem thanks Soviet soldiers as saviors of “happy childhoods, and of peace without cannons, bombs and mines” (p. 7). The poem “On a military march” gives children ideas about who the soldiers are and what they represent (*Little Bee*, 1977a). The boy in this poem is searching for his brother in the military parade, wondering whether he was driving a tank, was in the artillery, or with the border guardians and their dogs. He then realizes that it does not matter where in the parade his brother is, “as all these soldiers can be my brothers” (p. 6). Soldiers were represented as tall, tough, smiling men, with faces “full of courage and bravery” (p. 6), admired by the children as “the sun is reflecting on their shiny machine guns” (p. 6). Another poem asks children if they are curious about the soldiers’ new uniforms (*Little Bee*, 1980b). It emphasizes that “soldiers like children” and that they “defend peace, with smiles on their faces, and stripes on their shoulders” (p. 2). In the accompanying illustration, boys are hugging each other and looking at marching soldiers with proud, romantic looks in their eyes (see Image 2). This romanticized notion of soldiers as defenders of peace and friends of each child was present throughout *Little Bee* in songs, poems, texts, reports, and stories.



Image 2. Children are portrayed in *Little Bee* as the youngest admirers and supporters of soldiers and their work (*Little Bee*, 1980a, p. 1; 1980b, p. 2).

Little Bee also published reports and photographs of Soviet soldiers visiting kindergartens and spending time with the children. The children were very happy, according to these published reports, as they sang songs about soldiers and taught them how to sing them as well. In one report the kindergarten was “visited by soldiers and children were very excited. They sang them a song “Soldiers walk, our soldiers walk” (*Little Bee*, 1976b, p. 2). In another report, kindergarten children placed flowers on the graves of soldiers in “gratitude for a happy and cheerful childhood” (p. 2). The report “Beautiful Day” outlines how kindergarten children take a trip to the military barracks (*Little Bee*, 1976a). The teacher explains that “all soldiers that defend our homeland, have a huge celebration” (p. 2). Peter adds that he knows that soldiers are “safeguarding our peace and quiet life” while little Hortenzia says “I have a flower for a soldier” (p. 3). Children give flowers to a soldier by the gate and “happily return to kindergarten” (p. 3).

Kindergarten teachers’ letters reporting on many such visits were published in *Little Bee*. In one complex report, the teachers describe Major Šramko’s visit to a kindergarten carrying a “machine gun and pistol, but children were

not scared of him. They knew, that in peace time no one shoots” (Little Bee, 1977b, p. 2). It says they first exercised together, to prove to the Major how “strong and healthy children are” (p. 2). The children sing for him and they all walk to a memorial, each child with a flower, and a boy named Pet’ko “guards the memorial for one minute like a real soldier” (p. 2). The Major then tells the children “the saddest fairy tale” (p. 2) about childhood during wartime. However, the Major states that there are also “happy fairy tales” and he creates a white mist from a smoke grenade “just like the one from Cinderella” (p. 3).

The report portrays children as excited, playing all kinds of games in the white mist. The Major explains that soldiers use this white mist when they do not want to be spotted by enemies. The children stand silent for a moment in front of the memorial to pay homage to those who fought for a better life. The children sing: “We feel good here, it is a beautiful day, the sun is shining and the earth smells nice. With grass and flowers together we grow, we feel good and love our homeland.” Uncle Major likes the song and learns it straight away. Uncle Major says: “Because you were so well disciplined and brave, everyone gets a badge.” And he puts a badge on each child’s coat and fires three rockets: one for the fallen heroes, another for freeing the town, and a third for this meeting (p. 3).

Soldiers were also featured on the cover of *Little Bee*. In one, a soldier marches with excited children, and as he turns around and salutes to them, a young boy with a paper soldier hat salutes back (see Image 2). The notion of peace associated with soldiers is emphasized by children carrying flowers in the foreground of an illustration that has a tank surrounded by green bush in the background. The poem that accompanied this picture explains that the tank “is guarding our homeland so we can all be happy” (*Little Bee*, 1980a, p. 1). According to *Little Bee*, kindergarten children admired soldiers and enjoyed marching with them, drawing them, and pretending to be them in their play (*Little Bee*, 1977c). In short, the children were learning how to become active supporters and the country’s youngest patriots.

Neoliberal Patriotism in Contemporary New Zealand

Defining or conceptualizing patriotism in contemporary New Zealand is a challenging undertaking. The East-West, communist-capitalist binaries that so influenced the (re)presentations and performances of patriotism in communist Czechoslovakia no longer exist. Indeed, a time of brutal terrorist attacks on civilian populations has replaced the cold war theater performances of patriotism in schools and on streets. Now, instead of fighting empires, the “enemy,” who in the past children should learn to fear or despise, is represented by a cruel if not evil ideology, which is widely diffused. It is no longer located in one person or government but is represented by small groups of terrorist cells. However, in contrast to other Western countries, which are actively grappling with notions and constructs of patriotism in relation to global issues—the unstable world politics, global terrorism, simmering unrest, and tensions among nations—New Zealand has remained somewhat immune, or at least distanced from and largely ambivalent towards these issues.

This isolation or at least separation from broader trends stems in part from New Zealand’s position in the world. Geographically, New Zealand is an isolated country, with no near neighbors, and seemingly

at the ends of the earth. This geographic distance impacts the psyche of many New Zealanders, making them feel in a position of inferiority—the distant, poor cousin—and consequently builds the notions that New Zealand and New Zealanders have something to prove. This is enhanced by New Zealand’s position as a relatively minor player on the world scene. Internationally, New Zealand is perhaps best known for its rugby team, the All Blacks; for being the setting of the Lord of the Rings films; for the Flight of the Conchords, a male comedy duo; and for Lorde, the female singer-songwriter. Indeed, these are likely the very things about which New Zealanders would demonstrate the most patriotic fervor.

This places New Zealand somewhat at odds from the rising patriotism that is infiltrating the education policy and curriculum materials of other Western countries. For instance, following the 2005 terrorist attacks in London, patriotism has gained increasing prominence in the United Kingdom’s education policy. Conservative politician Michael Gove, in 2009, before he became Minister of Education in the United Kingdom, proclaimed:

There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country’s historic achievements. Which is why the next Conservative government will ensure the curriculum teaches the proper narrative of British History – so that every Briton can take pride in this nation. (Gove, 2009, n.p.)

This statement builds on the words of Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who in 2006 stated:

Just as in war time a sense of common patriotic purpose inspired people to do what is necessary, so in peace time a strong modern sense of patriotism and patriotic purpose which binds people together can motivate and inspire.... [W]e should not recoil from our national history – rather we should make it more central to our education. I propose that British history should be given much more prominence in the curriculum – not just dates, places and names, nor just a set of unconnected facts, but a narrative that encompasses our history. (Brown, 2006, n.p.)

In contrast, there is a decided ambivalence about making nation-state claims in New Zealand, beyond what could be perceived as superficial claims of the superiority of the rugby team and the beauty of the natural landscape. Perhaps some of this reluctance is the result of New Zealand continuing to grapple with its colonial past. While to many, New Zealand—Aotearoa in Maori—has gone further than most countries in addressing and redressing its colonial past, its official position as a bicultural nation remains contested. For some, the biculturalism is misplaced in light of the multiculturalism that now defines New Zealand society. For others, the current form of biculturalism does not go far enough in ascribing Maori rights as tangata whenua, the guardians and original inhabitants of the land. For both camps, the current bicultural positioning and its manifestations in public policy and public institutions, including the education system, create an uneasy relationship to any claims of nation-state patriotism.

It is in this context of geographic isolation and a continued grappling with the country’s colonial past that a new, neoliberal patriotism may be positioned and understood. In the absence of a defining historical narrative and a continued debate over New Zealand as a bicultural nation, a global neoliberalism is present in New Zealand and in the institutions and institutional and political thought that govern the country. As Roberts (2009) has suggested,

this “new patriotism” is not so much centered on a love of one’s country but on the love of a neoliberal orientation to economic and social life, focused more on individual advancement than on communal or national growth. Neoliberal ideas have played an increasingly significant role in New Zealand policy over the past twenty years, not least in the educational models and approaches being adopted. Roberts (2009) claims:

This has been promoted in tandem with the notion of advancing New Zealand as a knowledge economy and society. The new patriotism encourages New Zealanders to accept, indeed embrace, a single, shared vision of the future: one structured by a neoliberal ontology and the demands of global capitalism. (p. 1)

This interplay of patriotism with neoliberalism is evident throughout the current New Zealand Curriculum (2007). As a document, the New Zealand Curriculum is deeply rooted in the neoliberal agenda, with a focus on competitive globalism and how New Zealand and its interests, including her citizens, connect with and contribute to the broader economic world order. The foreword, written by the then Secretary of Education Karen Sewell, includes the following:

There has been no slowing of the pace of social change. Our population has become increasingly diverse, technologies are more sophisticated, and the demands of the workplace are more complex. Our education system must respond to these and the other challenges of our times.... The New Zealand Curriculum is a clear statement of what we deem important in education. It takes as its starting point a vision of our young people as lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved. It includes a clear set of principles on which to base curriculum decision making. It sets out values that are to be encouraged, modelled, and explored. It defines five key competencies that are critical to sustained learning and effective participation in society and that underline the emphasis on lifelong learning.

The neoliberal agenda is evident in this statement. There is an argument for a new educational paradigm framed by a rapidly changing world, the advent of the so-called knowledge society and knowledge economy, and exponential developments occurring in digital technologies.

The removal from the curriculum of all content in favor of a concepts, skills, and competencies approach plays into the neoliberal agenda and this new patriotism. New Zealand has one of the most autonomous school systems in the world, in which each school is self-managing, and this has resulted in there being limited channels for building consistent patriotic purpose across education. Unlike the content-rich curriculum of the United Kingdom or the ministry-produced and mandated curriculum materials of communist Czechoslovakia, each New Zealand school has the opportunity to determine how it interprets and teaches the New Zealand Curriculum, including the curriculum materials it utilizes.

The impact of this outcome-based approach, as opposed to a content- or knowledge-based approach, is evidenced through the limiting and narrowing of the historical content being taught in schools (Ormond, 2018) and a corresponding absence of a centrally determined notion of New Zealand history that is

deemed essential for all school children to learn. In their comparison of the history curricula and the teaching of history in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, Harris and Ormond (2018) demonstrate that in New Zealand the history curriculum has become increasingly more generic and less prescriptive, with “selections of historical content largely made on the grounds that they are suitable for addressing the concepts or disciplinary procedures assessed in a particular achievement standard” (p. 9). Even in an assessment that requires students to evaluate an historical event that is “significant to New Zealanders,” Harris and Ormond (2018) found that “the importance of significance as an historical concept can be sidelined as teachers focus upon the suitable selection of an event [for assessment purposes] as their priority” (p. 10). The focus on achievement standards and objectives is prioritized with the teaching of specific content and the role of historical content is increasingly marginalized. This educational development is one offshoot of the impact of neoliberalism on schooling.

An orientation towards the achievement of generic standards and outcomes provides one lens for understanding how the New Zealand education system and curriculum materials sideline more traditional nation-state notions of patriotism in favor of ideas embedded in neoliberal patriotism. However, while nation-state patriotism, such as that developed in the *Little Bee* stories in communist Czechoslovakia, are easily visible in curriculum materials, the “new patriotism” present in the New Zealand Curriculum document is less obvious. Instead, it is embedded within the vision of a “twenty-first-century curriculum,” which emphasizes the development of students’ individual learning capacities and competitiveness rather than a specific national narrative.

It is this focus on generic twenty-first century skills and knowledge that are outlined in the “vision” laid out at the beginning of the curriculum document. This vision positions the purpose of education as the advancement of New Zealand as a nation through ensuring that all young people develop the knowledge, skills, competencies, and dispositions to be effective contributors, not least to the economic progress of the country:

Our vision is for young people:

- Who will be creative, energetic, and enterprising;
- Who will seize the opportunities offered by new knowledge and technologies to secure a sustainable social, cultural, economic, and environmental future for our country;
- Who will work to create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which Maori and Pakeha recognize each other as full Treaty partners, and in which all cultures are valued for the contributions they bring;
- Who, in their school years, will continue to develop the values, knowledge, and competencies that will enable them to live full and satisfying lives;
- Who will be confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners.

(Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8)

There is a semblance of nation-state patriotism in this vision as young people are imagined to contribute actively to the advancement of their country. The importance of the future and ensuring future outcomes—

presumably both individual and national—is captured in one of the eight principles underpinning the curriculum document. The Future Focus principle reads: “The curriculum encourages students to look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship, enterprise, and globalization” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). The document tasks education with ensuring that young people will be able to contribute to their country and with establishing the nation’s place in the wider world. However, while positioning the advancement of New Zealand as a nation at the heart of the document’s vision, there is no corresponding content or historical knowledge or understanding of New Zealand as a nation-state embedded within it.

As a consequence, it can reasonably be argued that the vision set out in the *New Zealand Curriculum* is little different from the neoliberal rhetoric that infiltrates the policy documents of numerous international organizations—such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or European Commission—or individual countries. Indeed, it is only the occasional reference to New Zealand as a bicultural country and mention of Maori and Pakeha and the Treaty of Waitangi that provide any sort of contextual anchor to the document. The document as a whole is characterized by generic language and absence of specific content or references that link it specifically to New Zealand. This genericism reinforces the neoliberal patriotism argument being developed here. Rather than a patriotism built on what is uniquely New Zealand, a sense of duty, history, and love of one’s country, patriotism is love of an economic and social orientation. Patriotism is no longer linked to a specific country and its socio-cultural and historical context but to a generic set of global skills, competencies, and ideals.

Shifting (Re)Presentations and Performances of Patriotism in Education

The governing political ideology together with the temporal and geographical context impact the ways in which patriotism is (re)presented and performed through curriculum materials. The political and educational systems of communist Czechoslovakia and contemporary New Zealand could not be more different. The (re)presentations and performances of patriotism through curriculum materials are intimately connected to and informed by their political, geographical, temporal, economic, and social contexts.

The depth of the analysis of the *Little Bee* stories and accompanying images reflects the central importance of patriotism to the government of communist Czechoslovakia. Patriotism was a form of power and control over the citizens and the centralized and heavily prescriptive nature of education enabled curriculum materials like *Little Bee* to play a substantial role in communicating what it meant to be patriotic in communist Czechoslovakia. The neoliberal patriotism that appears to be shaping New Zealand society and school-level education through the curriculum document is in stark contrast to patriotism in communist Czechoslovakia.

By basing the analysis and argument on documents, this essay has provided a reading of patriotism in education in each country context. However, such a reading can only take us so far. There is often a discrepancy between what is communicated (implicitly and explicitly) through texts and what is enacted on the ground. That is, there is a difference between (re)presentations of patriotism in curriculum materials and the performances of patriotism those materials may inspire. To more fully probe the constructions of patriotism in education, it is critical to go beyond texts to engage in the natural settings of schools and classrooms, where the curriculum is enacted.

It is entirely possible that the intended patriotism of both the *Little Bee* stories and the New Zealand Curriculum in fact are operationalized and understood in very different ways by teachers and students. Did kindergarten children in communist Czechoslovakia understand or subscribe to the patriotic visions communicated to them in the *Little Bee* stories? Or did they resist the messages? Similarly, do New Zealand teachers understand and promote the neoliberal agenda and vision as it is presented in the *New Zealand Curriculum*? How do New Zealand schoolchildren encounter, and do they actually understand, neoliberal patriotism?

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