

THE CRISIS IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS

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*A review of
The crisis in New Zealand schools, by
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In a book divided into 12 chapters and covering 205 pages, the late Martin Hames (1961-2002) set out to examine numerous crises that he believed threatened the contemporary New Zealand schooling system. His is, however, not the only work to have focused on perceived crises in education; a former Minister of Education in the Muldoon National government (1978-1984), Mervyn Wellington, had written a book with a similar title nearly two decades earlier.¹ Both authors had proudly claimed to be educational "traditionalists", and both appeared supremely confident that their prescriptions for "reforming" the school system represented enlightened educational thinking that ought to be adopted universally. A further similarity is that Wellington and Hames are likely to be regarded as right-of-centre in their educational politics by readers of their respective work.

From the outset, Hames declared that his book was aimed primarily at "the general reader" rather than "education specialists" (p. 9). After conceding that he was not an education specialist the author hoped that his observations and recommendations would not be dismissed as superficial or unimportant. To this end, Hames sought to justify his work with the comment that "perhaps it is time for a plain speaking, occasionally rather derisive, non-expert to have a say" (p. 9). He did this by vigorously promoting the "traditionalist arguments" (p. 9) that he thought belonged to "a beleaguered minority" (p. 9) in the debate over education in New Zealand.

Hames' central thesis is outlined in chapter one. He began by boldly declaring that "a tendency to complacency has dogged our education system for far too long" (p. 13), mainly because "so-called progressive educationists" (p. 13) have been allowed to exert too great an influence over New Zealand schools. These people, the author noted bitterly, "would lead our schools to sunny new uplands of meaningful learning and motivated students" (p. 13). But nowhere has he noted that advocates of the market liberal "reforms" in and beyond the mid-1980s were *also* confidently proclaiming that adopting their ideas would pave the way to an educational (and economic) nirvana. Hames was thus willing to allege that educationists were "[trying] to impose their singular view of the world on others" (p. 13), without also acknowledging that interventionist strategies had – and still hold – immense appeal to neoliberal supporters.

The author singled out illiteracy, innumeracy, ignorance, and ill-discipline – "the four 'i's" (p. 13) – as especially worrisome features of the present day education system. To this list he added recent curricular changes, "a new assessment regime" (p. 13), and the poor quality of the New Zealand teaching force. The latter, Hames maintained, are "as much victims of the system as anyone" (p. 26) because they feel undervalued and overburdened by an unreasonable internal assessment workload. His chief complaint was that knowledge is being presented by "trendy theor[ists]" as "simply a personal construct" (p. 18), with the result that too many children leave school without the knowledge that "an educated person" (p. 18) ought to have acquired. In Hames' view, this knowledge encompasses English and English literature, mathematics, science, geography, history, an understanding of a foreign language, and the structure and functions of the New Zealand political system (p. 19). History and geography were thought to be infinitely preferable to social studies, because of the latter's objectionable, overt social and political agenda, the author concluded (p. 19).

Hames was adamant that the numerous curricular and other deficiencies he identified in his book could be overcome by dethroning child-centred educational philosophies – those associated with an "Alice-in Wonderland world" (p.24) where logical thinking and effective teaching are suppressed in "a surreal journey" (p.24) – and the wholesale adoption of a liberal education curriculum (p.29). Such an education, Hames claimed, would expand "mental and cultural horizons" (p.29), foster worthwhile habits and morals, and emphasise "order and discipline" (p.29) among learners. In his opinion, action research, critical theory, constructivism, cultural and moral relativism, group work, self-esteem, relevance, creativity, and the notion of the whole person have been (over)promoted in the New Zealand schooling system in recent years, with devastating consequences (see, for example, pp. 32-53).

Readers will doubtless respond to Hames' comments with either admiration or scorn, or something in between. Nonetheless, we believe that his discussion of many of these notions should not be rejected simply as the rantings of "that New Right scum" (p. 33) or "Attila the Hun" (p. 33). For example, his hard-hitting criticisms of "the obsession with self-esteem" (p. 45) and "the mantra of relevance" (p. 49) raise several issues about which educators and other interest groups ought to be concerned. After declaring that "nobody is in favour of education being 'irrelevant' to the young" (p. 49), Hames attacked the arrogance and self-indulgence that he felt was associated with pleas for greater relevance. He observed perceptively: "after all, one of the purposes of an education is to take children beyond their current state of mind and open up new vistas" (p. 49). We suspect that few if any educators would disagree with Hames' assertion, although some may question his premise that worthwhile learning occurs only when a teacher is present.

Hames also argued that the absence of "[intellectual] substance" (p. 47) in the present day school curriculum meant that many students were ill-equipped to ascertain the validity of different types of information (p. 43). This deficiency will not be addressed by relying on modern "information technology" (IT) (p. 43) to fill the gap, the author believed. Too many bold claims have been made in support of IT "by the more excited techno-enthusiasts among us" (p. 43), Hames declared, and these must be exposed and debunked. Although some readers may find the author's remarks unpalatable, it can be argued that a cargo-cult mentality has in fact dominated discussion about the use of IT in New Zealand schools in particular and society in general.²

In a similar vein, Hames set out to challenge the all-too-familiar assertion that the world is changing so fast that whatever is taught in schools will date quickly and eventually become valueless. What has been ignored, the author observed, is the reality that "rapid social and technological change has been with us at least since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century" (pp. 35-36). Hames concluded that in any era of change many constants remain, and these ought not to be ignored.

Readers will quickly appreciate that the author placed great faith in the capacity of a liberal education curriculum to solve major education problems. Such a curriculum, Hames predicted, could yield positive educational outcomes only when other educational defects were openly acknowledged and confronted. The issues of concern he nominated were the "political agenda" (p. 25) that devalued "legitimate knowledge" (p. 25), the "curriculum catastrophies" (p. 75) associated with the teaching of social studies, science, and English, the "assessment atrocities" brought about by "the wild-goose chase of unit standards" (p. 113), and "the quagmire of the NCEA [National Certificate of Educational Achievement]" (p. 123).

To the above list of grievances Hames added the denigration of "western civilisation" by "many intellectuals" (p. 57), the deliberate censorship of "the less savoury aspects of...[indigenous] cultures" (p. 58) by academics and educationists, the attempt by educators to assign at least equal if not superior validity to Māori knowledge, frameworks, and conceptions (p. 59), and academics' obsession with promoting Marxist doctrines. Moreover, he claimed that the current education system is dominated by anti-sexist and anti-racist edicts that warrant critical scrutiny (pp. 59-61), that cultural relativism had reached absurd proportions in the promotion of Māori scientific and other knowledge (p. 62), and that bilingual education and Māori immersion schools will ultimately "ghettoise" (pp. 63-64) Māori children and widen existing gaps in school achievement between Māori and non Māori.

Hames placed much of the blame for the perceived education crisis on "the Treaty guilt trip" (p. 64), alongside the unwillingness of "hard left [-wing]" (p. 57) staff in colleges of education and university education departments to "read the views of the leading market liberal thinkers" (p. 67). If they did so then he believed that they would soon understand how school choice and competition both empowers parents and children, and enhances student and school performance. In the meantime, educationists continued to downplay the genetic component of intelligence and concentrate on advocating equal outcomes for all students, regardless of their abilities and backgrounds, Hames lamented. We suggest, however, that the author has been somewhat disingenuous in his discussion of "the obsession with equal outcomes" (p. 70) in particular. Although Hames asserted that "a levelling ideology" (p. 71), which disadvantages the better students, is in operation, he ignored the genuine desire of many educators to try to improve

the performance of children who may be labelled less academic. Similarly, Hames' views on the Treaty of Waitangi gave insufficient attention to the practical difficulties associated with implementing educational and other policies that are more inclusive of, and respectful toward, people from different cultures. Furthermore, there is no recognition of the reality that there will be inevitable disagreements and controversies whenever policymakers and other groups endeavour to formally recognise the rights and demands of indigenous peoples. Contrary to Hames' thesis, however, we believe that this work cannot be regarded as either indulgent or discriminatory if New Zealand is to function as a participatory democracy.

Hames' discussion of the "catastrophies" (p. 75) associated with the current National Curriculum Framework (NCF) clearly reveals his intense dislike of the Framework's "straightjacket" (p. 77). His stated preference was for there to be no national curriculum and for "individual schools to set their own curricula" (p. 77). Here, Hames has unfortunately ignored some historical literature that explains why a compulsory common core curriculum was adopted in New Zealand primary schools from 1878 (Campbell, 1940; Ewing, 1970), and post primary schools from 1946 (Department of Education, 1944; Lee, 1992; Lee & Lee, 1992; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993). Nevertheless, this omission did not stop Hames from boldly asserting that the NCF emphasises skill acquisition and performance at the expense of knowledge, fails to distinguish between different types of learning or subject areas, and stresses learning outcomes (pp. 78-79) without satisfactory, clear specifications.

Singling out social studies, science, and English as being the worst examples of dumbed-down curricula, Hames confidently decreed that social studies teaching is "slanted" (p. 83), incoherent, and philosophically flawed (p. 84). His reasoning was that "social justice" and "human rights" are presented uncritically and too early in children's schooling (p. 85), that social studies is overtly pro-Māori, and that Western societies and their heritage are seriously undervalued. Such claims were invoked to justify a return to the teaching of geography, history, economics, and related studies as stand-alone subjects, and to jettison social studies from the national curriculum. Somewhat surprisingly, because Hames' account did not refer to the New Zealand academic literature on social studies, he was unable to examine the thinking underpinning the introduction and retention of this "integrated" subject (see, for example, Openshaw, 1992; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993).

The national science curriculum, by comparison, allegedly suffers from an "overdose of 'relevance'" (p. 89) by virtue of its having adopted a constructivist approach to learning and teaching. What is needed, Hames announced, was the substitution of a "scientific culture" (p. 98) for the "pseudo-science" (p. 98) being taught under the NCF, and the capacity for students and teachers to make valid distinctions between science and technology (p. 95).

The provision of differentiated science curricula for students of varying ability (p. 97) – "educational apartheid" (p. 97), in the opinion of "the [again unspecified] educational establishment" (p. 97) – and the adoption of a more teacher and less child-focused pedagogy will also assist students to become "more informed citizen[s] of a democracy" (p. 98), Hames assumed. Such claims, we envisage, will doubtless be challenged by science educators and scientists alike, especially in light of the author's earlier assertion that "intellectual honesty requires us to keep an open mind" (p. 70). Similarly, Hames' arguments in favour of differentiated curricula for New Zealand schools ought to be placed in a broader context. If this work had been undertaken then the author would have discovered that differentiation was a highly contested concept (see, for example, Lee & Lee, 1992; McKenzie, Lee, & Lee, 1990), and that its introduction was motivated by a desire to sort students into different groups based on their perceived ability and vocational aspirations.

At this point, readers may be able to predict the kinds of criticisms that Hames wished to level at the English curriculum and its authors. They would be correct if the following deficiencies were identified: the incorporation of an overly child-centred, pro-Maori bias (pp. 99-100), an emphasis on "creative writing" to the detriment of formal grammar instruction and comprehension exercises (pp. 104-105), and the virtual exclusion of classical English literature in the relentless, politically correct quest to promote "New Zealand texts" (p. 106). When viewed alongside the "implicit bias and agenda of left-wing indoctrination" (p. 108) that Hames maintained was a dominant feature of the health and physical education curriculum, there appeared to be few if any endearing features to the NCF and its subject matter.

To make matters worse, Hames then wrote, the way in which the ill-conceived NCF was to be assessed was nothing short of an unmitigated disaster. The abandonment of external secondary school examinations was a retrograde step, in the author's opinion, especially when

they were replaced with the "mad scientist" (p. 117) unit standards model under Lockwood Smith's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of the early 1990s. In his discussion of examinations Hames made several comments that will appeal to many educators, notably that "learning is not always about attaining 'outcomes'" (p. 117), that ambiguities always arise when "standards" are defined (p. 118), and that unit standards "[impose] just one narrow framework" (p. 120) on schools across New Zealand society. His main complaint was expressed in the following terms:

When we attempt to break an academic subject into fragments, and then assess those fragments, we may fail to do justice to the deeper insight that makes use of connections among the components. Even many vocational subjects cannot be treated in this manner. (p. 119)

Such fragmentation has, and will continue to have, serious consequences for teachers, students, and learning, Hames predicted. The former become simply "tickers of boxes" (p. 121) in a system where their workload is unmanageable and where they cannot function as "unbiased assessors" (p. 120). These deficiencies are particularly evident in "[the] extraordinary dog's breakfast" (p. 125) known as the NCEA. Hames expected that the introduction of the standards based NCEA assessment regime will lead to "narrow and formula-based" instruction (p. 126) and envisaged that it will *not* provide better information about students' actual school achievements (see, for example, Lee & Lee, 2000). Hames' concern was that, contrary to the Ministry of Education rhetoric, the NCEA will *not* narrow existing gaps in educational achievement because middle class parents, employers, and staff in tertiary institutions will promptly identify "good schools" (p. 128) and will be favourably disposed toward those secondary schools offering internationally recognised external examinations. He concluded his discussion of the NCEA "quagmire" (p. 123) and "experiment" (p. 130) by remarking that it was but one example of the "poor quality of ... educational policy debate" (p. 130) in this country.

To whom does Hames attribute much of the blame for the current, deplorable situation with New Zealand schools? "The educational establishment" (p. 130), he believed, was primarily culpable for having adopted an anti-intellectual, "progressive" philosophy of schooling. Such thinking was easily discernible in colleges of education, Hames declared, whose staff allegedly not only lacked academic rigour (p. 136) but also were actively engaged in promoting a dangerous, uncritical, Marxist "ideological indoctrination" (p. 136).

There are problems with the author's line of argument here, however. He failed to note that because so much emphasis has been placed in more recent years on college staff teaching subjects directly related to school curricula, there is little (if any) opportunity to provide the type of "indoctrination" so detested by Hames. Instead, with the move in the late 1990s away from the well-established and respected four-year BEd to a three-year BTchg degree, the space to offer the broad, liberal education that Hames and other right-of-centre commentators value so highly was reduced (see, for example, Alcorn, 1999). The result is that fundamental education disciplines or fields of inquiry became marginalised. Yet this is precisely the type of knowledge that Hames et al. regarded as being so indispensable to students' "proper" education.

Although the author never defined what his favourite phrase – "the educational establishment" – meant, and to whom it was intended to apply, Hames presumably saw teacher unions as either being a part of, or somehow affiliated to, this grouping. He made no effort to disguise his contempt for the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) because of their resolute opposition to school competition, the abolition of zoning, greater parental choice of schools, and the bulk funding of teachers' salaries (pp. 139-140). Hames wanted these unions to operate as "professional organisation[s]" (p. 141) rather than remaining militantly political in their activity, but he seemed unaware that organisations tend to become political when their members were compelled to work in an overtly political environment. In other words, the NZEI and PPTA became increasingly political when more members recognised that various governments were attempting to politicise schooling in ways they deemed undesirable and/or miseducative (see, for example, Jesson, 1999; Sullivan, 1999).

Such politicisation of schooling Hames found to be disturbing for he believed that education could and should take place without reference to party politics. We may presume, in this connection, that the author would not have shared the Ministry of

Education's (1993) verdict, in *Education for the 21st Century*, that "[the publication] is a national goal-setting exercise and not a political document" (p. 8). This official rhetoric was sharply at odds with the following assessment of the Bolger National government's closely related curriculum framework policy by Michael Peters, Jim Marshall, and Lauren Massey:

The curriculum [cannot be] a neutral assemblage of knowledge and skills but rather a selection of knowledge packaged as skills, which represents a particular world-view and [a] specific set of interests...[therefore, the anonymous] authors of the National Curriculum have achieved a number of political objectives. (1994, p. 261)

It is somewhat ironic that the very NCF that Hames disliked so intensely was the product of a right-of-centre government. As mentioned previously, the author levelled most of his criticism at the curriculum content, the manner in which it was being disseminated, and the political environment wherein it was to be delivered. For example, the reluctance of educators to "[grasp] the logic of [school] choice" (p. 142) and competition, along with their instinctive and uncritical endorsement of public in preference to private education (pp. 142-143), has created "an entrenched culture" within which "largely unaccountable" educators enjoy "a semi-monopoly status" (p. 25), Hames contended.

It is reasonable to expect that in reaching his conclusions Hames would have engaged extensively with a wide variety of literature, both supportive and oppositional. Many readers, we believe, are likely to be disappointed on this ground at least, given that the author's discussion of school choice, for instance, privileged the pro-choice commentator by assigning footnotes to his dialogue. This person, Hames informed us, was "well-read and cautious about making statements he cannot substantiate" (p. 142). By comparison, the *critic* of school choice is described as being "much vaguer when it comes to backing up his claims" (p. 142). What eventuates is a carefully contrived and distorted dialogue, one in which the author clearly failed to be guided by his own principle that in any educational debate there must be a "countervailing balance" (p. 136). Based on Hames' account, readers could be forgiven for thinking that no academic literature exists that critiques school choice. Such an inference cannot, of course, be substantiated (see, for example, Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999; Thrupp, 1995; Wylie, 1999).

There are further weaknesses with the author's description of the perceived merits of school choice. Hames ignored the fact that "good" secondary schools are (and have long been) labelled thus because their staff and governing authorities tend to act cautiously rather than innovatively in an institutionally competitive environment. It is this deliberate, conservative behaviour that has enabled them to perform well in national examinations. Consequently, the institutional diversity which Hames identified as being so vital to a good schooling system (p. 143) may not materialise, given the numerous advantages to be gained by merely protecting and preserving the status quo. Furthermore, no explanation is offered about why private and state schools are deserving of "broadly equal" (p. 142) funding, and no definitions are given of what "superior school performance" (p. 148) is or what "bad state schools" (p. 148) might look like. These seem to be oversights from an author who claimed to value technical precision in educational terminology.

Another serious deficiency emerges from Hames' discussion of school choice in that he ignored how people come to hold views about what is and is not educationally worthwhile. Having cited American studies that endorsed school choice and competition, the author failed to acknowledge the very real problems associated with translating findings and recommendations from one cultural context to another. Preferring assertion over scholarly analysis, Hames also did not explain why he believed that Māori would not be disadvantaged under a full school choice regime or why "white flight" (p. 157) was unlikely to occur. Moreover, some confusion over nomenclature and historical dates is apparent when, for example, Hames incorrectly labelled Catholic state integrated schools "private schools", and when he stated that Catholic schools began integrating into the New Zealand state education system in the 1990s, not from the late 1970s (p. 188). This error led the author to draw an invalid conclusion about schools' academic performance (p. 150; see also Lee & Lee, 1998).

Hames concluded his book with a ten page "Memorandum to the Minister of Education" (p. 163), wherein he reiterates his key complaints and recommendations. Readers who have worked their way studiously through the text will encounter few if any surprises: they are reminded, in case they forgot,

that state tertiary institutions are filled to overflowing with "woolly thinker[s]" (pp. 163-164), that school competition and choice must be promoted as essential "weapons" in "a cultural counter-revolution" (p. 164), and that "separate schools, and separate courses" (p. 170) should be created as a matter of urgency to cater for students of varying abilities. Restating the merits of a liberal education curriculum and the need to initiate youth into "a cultural tradition" (p. 168), Hames declared that "the traditionalists have been right all along" (p. 163). He presumed that such people fully approved of competition and choice, but offered no supporting evidence. Somewhat surprisingly, we suggest, Hames was unable to foresee the difficulties that would arise if schools were to offer "alternative forms of assessment" (p. 169). Yet historical research on New Zealand examinations has clearly demonstrated that whenever two types of assessment are on offer one will come to dominate the other (see, for example, Lee & Lee, 1992; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993).

The extent of the contradictions in the author's thinking is revealed when he claimed that a government could promote "a dominant system [of assessment]" (p. 169), immediately after having stated that there was no reason why different assessment systems could not "compete side by side on an equal footing" (p. 169). Similarly, Hames reported that he saw no problems with school league tables (p. 170), based on the (unexamined) belief that those educators who object to them are likely to be apologists for poor-performing schools. He ignored the fact that these league tables would not only reinforce conservative schooling policies and practices but also militate against the provision of the differentiated curricula he so desired. Furthermore, in expressing support for differentiated curricula and schooling, the author was unaware of their adoption in the post primary sector in New Zealand from about 1905 until the early 1970s, and that this arrangement had not been a resounding success (see, for example, McKenzie, Lee, & Lee, 1990; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993). As a result, Hames did not see the obvious irony in the comment that "understanding the past is crucial if we are not to repeat its mistakes" (p. 171). Nor did he appreciate the irony implicit in the remark that "balanced representation" (p. 168) is not attainable in a national curriculum when viewed alongside the claim that sociology could be taught "in a balanced manner" (p. 169). Instead, the author had implicit faith in the ability of a group of unspecified, totally impartial people who "know and love their subject" (p. 168) to be able to control curricular content,

free from considerations of contestation over what was to count, and not count, as legitimate school knowledge. Such faith, however, is not borne out by the historical research literature on schooling in New Zealand (see, for example, McKenzie, 1983; McKenzie, Lee, & Lee, 1996; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993).

Hames concluded his work with the statement that "I started this book believing that perhaps school choice, or competition between schools, has been somewhat oversold in some quarters as a cure-all for our educational ills" (p. 171). We suggest, however, that he ought to have reconsidered this initial premise. Having presented a unidimensional account of perceived schooling crises in several places throughout his book, Hames could be accused of actively promoting *his own variant* of "ideological capture" (p. 170) or "indoctrination" (p. 108), albeit of a different kind to what he had been critiquing. Accordingly, we suspect that his inability to recognise the real and potential disadvantages associated with curricular and institutional differentiation, school competition and choice, and his suggestions for examination and assessment reform, for example, may mean that Hames could be regarded as no less determined to "impose [a] singular view of the world on others" (p. 113) than were his adversaries, perceived and real.

NOTES

1. Wellington, M. L. (1985). *New Zealand education in crisis*. Auckland: Endeavour Press.
2. For three excellent critiques of the cargo-cult attitude toward technology instruction and utilisation see Marshall (2000a, 2000b) and Peters (1998).

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