

Looking back: Reflections on the 1877 Education Act

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During discussions within the editorial committee when contributions to volume four of *Teachers and Curriculum* (2000/20001) were being considered last year, the possibility was raised that an historical article be written for the next issue, one in which curriculum policy and practice would be explored in a nineteenth century New Zealand primary schooling context. In acting on this suggestion, we have chosen to examine the curriculum prescriptions contained in the 1877 Education Act and the debate in the House of Representatives over this curriculum. Future “reflections” in subsequent volumes will explore significant curriculum policies and practices that followed the 1877 legislation.

The 1877 curriculum

Buried deep within the Education Act of 1877 – a piece of legislation long noted for its complexity, breadth, and length (23 pages) – is a clause that prescribed the course of instruction to be followed in “every public school” from 1 January 1878. Those who drafted the legislation sought deliberately to “make further and better provision for the education of the people in the Colony of New Zealand” (The Education Act, 1877, Preamble, p.110). The following clause was intended to satisfy that objective:

Every public school shall be conducted in accordance with the following regulations (a copy of which regulations shall be conspicuously put up in every such school), namely, - (1) The subjects of instruction shall be as follows: - Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, English grammar and composition,

Geography, History, Elementary science and drawing, Object lessons, Vocal music, and (in the case of girls) sewing and needlework, and the principles of domestic economy. But no child shall be compelled to be present at the teaching of history whose parents or guardians object thereto. (Clause 84(1), p.126)

A caveat was applied to this curriculum, to avoid teacher and parental ambiguity arising over the ‘spirit’ or nature of the instruction that was to be provided compulsorily. The Act stipulated that “the teaching shall be entirely of a secular character” (Clause 84(2), p.126). This requirement was introduced specifically to eliminate the possibility of any denominational bias being introduced intentionally into the public school curriculum – a possibility that politicians in 1877 had been mostly keen to eliminate (Mackey, 1967). Another requirement, readily apparent from Clause 84(1) above, was that in cases where a child’s parents or guardians felt it warranted, he or she could be withdrawn from History lessons.

To New Zealand citizens in 2001 this might appear to be an odd, perhaps inexplicable, option, but not when it is recalled that in late nineteenth century New Zealand society there was a genuine concern that “History” could, and would, be used as an instrument to provide sectarian instruction covertly (Ewing, 1960). There was, nevertheless, an expectation among politicians in the 1877 Parliament that religious instruction would be offered in *private* schools that were operated (and funded, according to the 1877 Act) by the various



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churches extant in New Zealand. Public, or State, primary schools warranted altogether different treatment according to Charles Bowen, Minister of Justice, who introduced the Education Bill to the House of Representatives on 24 July 1877. Bowen confidently declared that:

Honourable gentlemen [members of parliament] will see, on perusing the Bill, that all the instruction that is to be given is absolutely secular, and that no religious teaching whatever will be allowed [in public primary schools]... When we establish a [schooling] system out of the public funds, and while men differ so seriously on religious subjects as they do now, we must take care that we do not allow every school-master to give such religious teaching as he may think right and suitable. (New Zealand Parliamentary Debates [NZPD], 24, 1877, p.36)

Curriculum philosophy: Overseas influences

The cardinal principle underpinning the primary school curriculum outlined in Clause 84(1) was that such a curriculum, when delivered compulsorily in every New Zealand state elementary school, was thought capable of minimising if not eliminating entirely criminal activity and social disharmony. A direct, positive correlation was drawn between ignorance (via a lack of formal education) and undesirable behaviour. "Education" by the State would ensure that the children of "a criminally negligent parent" (NZPD, 24, 1877, p.34) would not wreak havoc in their community. In short, compulsory primary schooling was viewed by Bowen, and most if not all politicians, as providing a much-needed form of social insurance. Bowen outlined his proposal for State intervention in the following manner:

The result of every inquiry shows that there are still in this country a very large number of children

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growing up in absolute ignorance...such a fact is a very great danger to a State and...it is absolutely the duty of the State to provide that primary education which is the key to knowledge for every child in the community, and which will alone prevent the population of any district falling into the absolute brutishness into which an uneducated people have a tendency to descend. (NZPD, 24, 1877, p.32)

In an effort to give practical effect to the ubiquitous maxim, "mens sana in corpore sano" (a healthy mind in a healthy body), provision was made in the legislation "for the instruction in military drill of all boys" and for "physical training" to be offered, wherever possible (The Education Act, 1877, Clause 85, p.126). Furthermore, the Act tried to encourage primary school authorities to establish at each school "a playground of at least a quarter of an acre" (Clause 85, p.126). The latter, however, was *not* a compulsory requirement, presumably in recognition of local, regional, and national variations in school sites, both existing and forthcoming. The clause relating to playground provision was borrowed

from the English Revised Code devised by the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, which had been enacted 15 years earlier (Ewing, 1960). Policy importation, in this and other respects, was a major feature of nineteenth (and twentieth) century educational decision-making. To this end, John Ewing has noted, "it was natural that English curricular theory and practice should have guided the provincial educationists [in the period 1853-1876]" (1960, p.49)¹. It was to be expected, therefore, that the 1877 education legislation would not represent a marked departure from this approach (McKenzie, Lee, & Lee, 1996). Accordingly, the New Zealand statute incorporated several key principles that had been articulated already in William Forster's 1870 Elementary Education Act in Britain and in legislation passed in New South Wales in 1872 and Queensland in 1875 (Ewing, 1960). In other words, the 1877 education legislation was evolutionary but not revolutionary (McKenzie, Lee, & Lee, 1996; Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993).

Political intervention in primary schooling

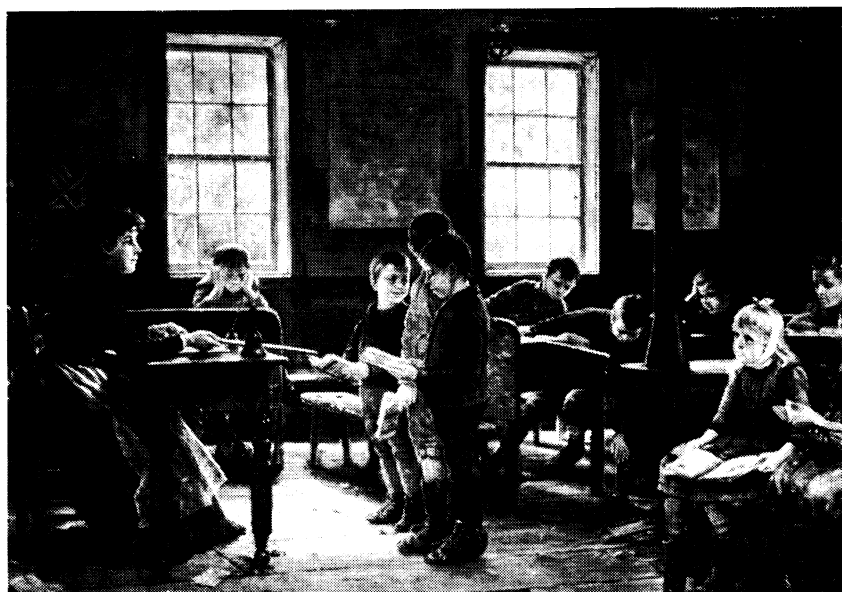
Bowen, as a co-author of the 1877 Bill (with John Hislop)², had not contemplated any real alternative to having the Department of Education exercise centralised control over the primary school curriculum. The explanation for his commitment to centralised curriculum prescription lay in Bowen's awareness of the difficulties that had arisen in the former provincial era (1853-1876), when all provinces had had complete control over schooling in their respective districts (Cumming & Cumming, 1978; Ewing, 1960). Ewing understood this reality when he wrote that "the general picture of the curriculum in New Zealand during the provincial period seems to have been one of considerable variety both in content and in methods of teaching" (1960, p.54). Such variety, in Bowen's opinion, meant that inefficiency and poor co-

ordination were all too evident in the schooling systems of the great majority of provinces. Indeed, as early as August 1868, Thomas Ball, Member of Parliament for Mangonui (North Auckland/Bay of Islands), had lamented the fact that the Stafford government had failed to enact “any general measure for securing to the rising population the advantages of elementary education” (NZPD, 2, 1868, p.259). Ball pressed for the introduction of “a uniform system of primary education” throughout New Zealand (NZPD, 4, 1868, p.202), in the belief that such a system would ensure that “every child has a fair chance for the development of his or her capabilities” (NZPD, 6, 1869, p.526). State intervention was needed urgently, in order that “unity of education throughout the Colony” could be obtained, Ball concluded (NZPD, 6, 1869, p.526).

Nearly a decade was to elapse before Ball and like-minded politicians saw evidence of the kind of State intervention in the primary schooling sector that they had sought, through the introduction of a centrally prescribed, compulsory curriculum. The 1877 legislation, in effect, alerted New Zealand citizens to the fact that the Government now viewed State intervention or involvement as being inseparable from “efficient” primary schooling provision. This mode of thinking was, of course, contested by those groups who favoured private schooling and individual and institutional autonomy. Consequently, the role of the State in education was not accepted unequivocally throughout the nation (Mackey, 1976) or in every community.

A primary focus

Although Bowen was willing to introduce legislation to establish primary schooling on a firmer foundation than had been the case during the provincial era, there was to be a definite limit to the apparent generosity of the Government’s educational provision. Bowen emphasised the point that free post primary schooling would *not* be part



of the Government’s responsibility; rather, the State’s expenditure and energy would be directed solely toward schooling the nation’s youth at the elementary level largely free of charge.³ Higher education was to be made available only to pupils who were able either to pay tuition fees or win a scholarship. The latter, Bowen declared unapologetically, was aimed at “children of unusual attainments and ability” (NZPD, 24, 1877, p.37). He envisaged that *secondary schooling* would be sought after by only a very small proportion of the youth population post 1878, for the following reasons:

It [the 1877 legislation] is not intended to encourage children whose vocation is that of honest labour to waste in the higher [secondary] schools time which might be better devoted to learning a trade, when they have not got the special talent by which that higher education might be made immediately useful. (NZPD, 24, 1877, p.37)⁴

Given Bowen’s desire to enhance the efficiency of primary schooling nationwide first and foremost, it was predictable that he would want the Department of Education to exercise “due control” over this schooling. Moreover, the Department was to be “the power which gives the money” to schools (NZPD, 24, 1877, p.32). Bowen was thus satisfied that the principle

of uniformity “in certain matters, such as standards” was justifiable, although he did not wish to advocate a policy of “absolute uniformity” (p.33) in all things educational.

A state monopoly over education?

Sir George Grey, twice former Governor of New Zealand, saw the matter very differently, however. In maintaining that Bowen’s legislation was simply “an attempt to reduce learning to one dead level”, Grey anticipated that in the proposed national primary schooling system only “one set of ideas” would be imparted by teachers to their pupils (NZPD, 25, 1877, p.223). Primary teachers’ work was to be “regulated” by inspectors who were likely to be “of one mould”, Grey lamented (p.223)⁵. In short, Grey objected to what he believed was a limited concept of “education” inherent within the legislation. The narrow primary curriculum did not help matters, he reasoned, because it represented only the barest rudiments of learning. Grey was convinced that the subject matter did not constitute either “knowledge” or “learning”. It merely afforded “the means of educating [a child]” (NZPD, 25, 1877, pp.222-223).

Grey’s concerns were echoed by at least one other prominent politician, James Wallis.⁶ Having anticipated that the State would wish to exercise a monopoly over

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schooling under the 1877 legislation, Wallis outlined the consequences of pursuing such a policy:

After all other educational systems are swept away, then education will be left wholly in the hands of the State: the schoolmaster will be appointed by the State, the lessons prescribed by the State, the books to be read fixed by the State – everything will be done by the State...the result will be a uniform monotonous system in which there will be no competition, and we shall be doing all we can to destroy the most important characteristics of our nature—individuality and variety of character. (NZPD, 25, 1877, p.192)

Uniformity, equality, and democracy

As Mackey’s (1967) work has shown, however, only a minority of politicians chose to criticise Bowen for adopting an interventionist stance toward the primary school curriculum. An explanation may rest with the likelihood that securing (for the first time, through legislation) uniformity in primary schooling provision held a special appeal to the many politicians who had witnessed substantial variations in the educational achievements of children in several former provinces. James Bonar, the Westland province’s one and only Superintendent, was but one member of the House of Representatives ready to lend support to legislation that looked like promising equality of

educational opportunity to all the colony’s children. After having declared that “uniformity in a system of education is as great an advantage as uniformity in a railway gauge” (NZPD, 26, 1877, p.132), Bonar confidently predicted that the 1877 legislation would make “the adoption of one general system applicable to all parts of the colony” (p.132) a reality and not empty rhetoric. An additional benefit from the legislation, in Bonar’s opinion, had been signalled already: State intervention in education had the potential to eliminate children’s “rowdiness or larrikinism” (p.131).

While Bonar’s arguments were influential in convincing the majority of his political colleagues to vote in favour of introducing the legislation, according to Mackey (1967), firm support for State involvement in primary schooling was already evident. Echoing Bowen’s sentiments, Daniel Pollen⁷ and James Menzies⁸ pointed to the important relationship between State-controlled primary schooling and effective citizenship in a democratic society. To this end Pollen declared:

In a democratic community like this, the possibility of the maintenance of democratic institutions as they ought to be maintained depends upon the intelligence of the people, and it is in the interests of the State to provide that intelligence with the means of cultivation. (NZPD, 26, 1877, p.119)

For his part, Menzies emphasised the need to prepare children for their future roles in New Zealand society. In the process of providing “the rising generation” with “such an education as the State supposes will best fit them to be wise and good citizens” (NZPD, 26, 1877, p.122), he acknowledged the State’s “paramount right and interest” over the “natural right” of parents to determine how their children should be schooled.

The standards examinations

Writing in 1928, the former Director of Education John

Caughley (1921-1927)⁹ provided a superb account of the numerous deficiencies associated with the 1877 legislation. In tandem with the “Regulations defining Standards of Education” gazetted on 26 September 1878, the 1877 Education Act fostered a “slavish obedience to the tyranny of mechanical tradition and convention”, Caughley noted (p.38). The six standards examinations for public primary schools were seen widely as affording an opportunity to secure a long-overdue uniformity of achievement nationwide. The predictable consequence was that these schools

...emphasised instruction as distinguished from education...[which] involved a comparative exaltation of the material to be taught, as against a sequential method of training and the natural development of the child. Much...was mere mental lumber, rarely seen or heard of outside of a school. Children of tender years wrestled with processes and problems and obsolete tables of arithmetic unknown in commerce and industry....Similarly, History, Grammar, Geography and other subjects meant little more than the acquisition of masses of often incoherent information. (p.38)

Some thirty years later, John Ewing’s research into the origins of the New Zealand primary school

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curriculum confirmed Caughley's assessment of events. Ewing argued that in 1877 the government paid "far too little heed to the colonial environment and to the limited capabilities of the bulk of colonial teachers", most of whom struggled to deliver the national curriculum in accordance with the standards prescribed in 1878 (1960, p.89). The detailed requirements of the 1878 standards regulations did not improve the situation, however, notwithstanding the Inspector-General of Schools' (William Habens') expressed wish to see the standards used by teachers "to promote a kind of instruction calculated to cultivate the intelligence of children", rather than "to be used as a rack to exhort from children a broken utterance of the last facts and ideas that have begun to take hold of their memory and intelligence" (Habens, 1881, cited in Ewing, 1960, pp.99-100).

Examinations and educational efficiency

Habens' plea for primary teachers not to use the standards regulations to encourage "the mere learning of lessons" and for pupils not "to do work that has no meaning to them" (Ewing, 1960, p.99) was quickly ignored. Explanations for this behaviour are not hard to find. As early as 1880 the Minister of Education, William Rolleston¹⁰, unashamedly told teachers to concentrate primarily on coaching their pupils to pass the standards examinations:

Other things being equal, the best [primary] school in a district is a school which passes a larger proportion of children than any other school in the district and at a lower average age, and a district is making progress if year by year the proportion of passes increases and the average age of passing becomes lower. (Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives [AJHR], H-1A, 1880, p.12)

By 1880, therefore, political support for using the standards

examinations publicly as instruments to assess teacher and pupil "efficiency" was readily apparent. Accordingly, it was entirely predictable that a school inspector such as William Hodgson¹¹ (in Nelson) would report that "The few teachers who have been imprudent enough to impart any instruction that does not tell directly on the standard [examination] work are not likely to repeat such an irregularity" (AJHR, H-II, 1880, p.22). Two years later the Hawke's Bay Inspector, Henry Hill,¹² described the unfortunate consequences of adhering strictly to these examinations. As a school inspector he was required by law to "balance the work of each pupil [in town, country, and bush schools throughout the district] by the same rigid standard" (AJHR, E-1B, 1881, p.13), and was unable to exercise any "discrimination" in his assessment. The examination system, Hill reported, simply tested pupils' memory, not their "varying modes of thought" (p.13). He concluded that "the children, unable to complain of the stones given to them instead of bread, become the victims of...a cruel and unnatural system of teaching" (p.13).

The legacy of the standards examinations

Such criticisms of the illiberal or miseducative consequences of rigidly adhering to the standards examinations were not unusual, however. Within five years of their inception many inspectors throughout New Zealand had expressed major reservations about "the standards" and their negative effect on the primary curriculum. Robert Lee¹³ (Wellington), for example, was particularly concerned at the short (17 month) period between the 1877 Act becoming operative (from 1 February 1878) and the date given for the full implementation of the standards examination regulations (1 July 1879) (Ewing, 1960, p.93). He wrote:

Suddenly there was launched upon districts, prepared or

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unprepared, a full and difficult programme, more comprehensive and more ambitious in aim than any in the British Empire....[In my district] not a single school fully and entirely covered the ground of the schedule, although many teachers put forward extraordinary efforts to do so. (AJHR, H-II, 1880, p.16)

William Hodgson, already a leading critic of the standards examination system, echoed Lee's sentiments. The former regretted that "the sweet simplicity of a list of passes and failures" was analysed too infrequently by the populace (AJHR, E-1B, 1882, p.14). Hodgson also lamented "[the] growing tendency, not only on the part of the general public, but on the part of many teachers who ought to know better, to gauge the success or failure of a school exclusively by the table of [examination] results" (p.14).

In less than a decade after the introduction of the Education Act (1877) and the Standards Regulations (1878), therefore, the national preoccupation with examination passes was being scrutinised increasingly by several school inspectors. They had witnessed first-hand the impact of examinations upon the primary curriculum, and the extent to which pupils' understanding of the subject matter was jeopardised by the familiar tendency to rote learn material that had minimal if any meaning to them. Attempts were made by the Department of Education and the Inspector-General

of Schools (William Habens, and later, George Hogben) during, and from, the late nineteenth century to mitigate the undesirable consequences of the standards examinations through curricular change via educational legislation. Such attempts, however, were bound to fail in a schooling system and society within which the examination-curriculum nexus had been firmly cemented into place.

Notes

1. Ewing provided some excellent descriptions of the primary schooling that was available in the various New Zealand provinces between 1853 and 1876. See Ewing (1960), pp.16-54.
2. John Hislop was a former Otago School Inspector and Secretary to the Otago provincial Education Board. He was appointed Secretary to the Department of Education in 1877, and occupied this post until his retirement in 1886. See Ewing (1960), pp.79-81.
3. It was Bowen's intention in the 1877 *Education Bill* that parents would contribute ten shillings per annum per child toward the cost of educating their sons and daughters. This sum of money was to be given to School Committees, not Boards of Education. The former, it was thought, would spend the money on managing and improving their own schools. Government was to contribute three pounds and ten shillings for every child attending a primary school. Bowen told the House of Representatives that "no more than seven-eighths of the whole cost of education will be thrown on the Consolidated Fund" (*NZPD*, 24, 1877, p.32). Parliamentary debate on the funding of primary schools, however, led to Bowen acknowledging the need for the state to fund schools fully, hence the ten shilling capitation fee was abolished under the 1877 Act. See Mackey (1967), pp.180-181.
4. The 1877 Education Act prescribed the curriculum to be taught in district high schools. These institutions comprised a small post primary division or department located alongside the primary department of schools that were based in most instances in rural communities. Students were expected to pay tuition fees in the senior (post primary or secondary) department (The Education Act, 1877, Clause 84(6), p.126), in order to receive instruction in the following subject areas: "all the branches of a liberal education, comprising Latin and Greek classics, French and other modern languages, Mathematics, [and] such other branches of science as the advancement of the colony and the increase of the population may from time to time require" (The Education Act, 1877, Clause 56, p.121). An almost identical curriculum was prescribed for *secondary schools* in a separate piece of legislation, the 1877 Education Reserves Act (Section 2, p.134).
5. Grey's objections were based on his belief that a uniform system of State primary schools would result inevitably from the passage of the 1877 legislation. Private schools were to be denied state financial aid under this legislation; a *State*, not a national, primary schooling system was therefore created. See Mackey (1967), pp.267-279.
6. Wallis, a surgeon, Independent church minister and Greek scholar, was an Auckland politician. He favoured State monies being given to private schools in order to guard against a State monopoly being exercised over primary schools. See Mackey (1967), pp.212-213.
7. Pollen, an Auckland member, was the Colonial Secretary and Native and Defence Minister in Harry Atkinson's ministry (1876-1877). He introduced the 1877 Education Bill to the Legislative Council (the upper house) in October 1877, three months after Bowen had presented the Bill to the House of Representatives (the lower house). See Mackey (1967), p.242.
8. Menzies, an Otago member, was described by Mackey as "a staunch Presbyterian" and an advocate of school-based religious instruction. See Mackey (1967), p.244.
9. Caughley, a former pupil teacher in Hastings and primary teacher in the Hawke's Bay district and Kaikoura North, later taught science and secondary school methods at Wellington Training College. In 1910 he was appointed headmaster of the West Christchurch District High School, and subsequently became an NZEI President. Caughley was appointed Assistant Director of Education to William Anderson early in 1916. On the latter's retirement in 1921 Caughley was appointed Director of Education. He held this position until his retirement early in 1927. Caughley was appointed Director of Education in Fiji from late 1927. See Davey (1928), pp.46-47.
10. Rolleston was a former Superintendent of the Canterbury Provincial Council and a member of Canterbury College's Board of Governors. A University of Cambridge graduate in classics (1855), Rolleston migrated to New Zealand in 1858. He was a member of the Tancred Commission (1863) which had examined the quality of educational provision in Canterbury province, and was Under-Secretary of Native Affairs in the mid 1860s. Rolleston held the office of Minister of Education from 8 October 1879 until 15 December 1880. See Cumming and Cumming (1978), pp.65, 70, 80, and 109.
11. Hodgson was appointed Inspector of Schools for the Nelson district in 1863. He retired from this post in 1894, during which time he gained prominence as a scholar of Greek and Latin, and as an able poet. See Ewing (1960), pp.77-78.

12. Hill, a Cheltenham Training College graduate, began his teaching career in Canterbury in 1873. After teaching science at Christ's College he moved to Napier in 1878 to work as a Hawke's Bay Education Board School Inspector. He retired from the post of Senior Inspector of Schools in Hawke's Bay 36 years later. See Ewing (1960), pp.85-86. A revealing and humorous account by Hill of his inspectorial work appears in Davey (1928), pp.103-110.
13. Lee, a former pupil teacher, was trained at the Anglican St. Mark's Training College in Chelsea. He was appointed Headmaster of the Bishop of Nelson's School, then commenced work as Inspector of Schools for the Wellington Education Board in 1874. Between 1878 and 1882 Lee was both Inspector and Secretary to the Wellington Education Board. He retired as a Wellington Inspector in 1902. See Ewing (1960), pp.84-85.

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