

A common core for a common culture? The introduction of a general education curriculum

Gregory Lee

*Department of Education Studies,
University of Waikato*

Howard Lee

*Department of Education
University of Otago*

At a time when there is potential for much debate about the 'proper' constitution of a national curriculum for New Zealand schools, it is useful to reflect upon the origins of our current core curriculum and the reasons for its introduction. This paper argues that, coinciding with the election of the first Labour government, there was increasing official agitation for post-primary school curricula to be substantially revised. Departmental officials and some prominent post-primary educators began to assert that an extensive general education (core) curriculum ought to be devised and made more readily available to pupils, and that curricular reform should take greater account of the full range of vocational opportunities available to adolescent boys and girls. The Thomas committee, set up in 1942 to consider these (and other) matter, concluded in favour of introducing a core curriculum common to all pupils regardless of either the type of post primary school they attended or the vocation they intended to pursue. Mason and Beeby - the Minister and Director of Education respectively - lent their full support to the committee's recommendations, and confidentially expected school teachers to view the report sympathetically. This paper concludes that in post war New Zealand teachers did not promptly endorse the committee's education philosophy. The overwhelmingly high public demand for the School Certificate qualification, which led to general education studies often being displaced by vocational subjects, did not assist the cause. These factors, taken together, ensured that curricular reform proceeded less smoothly and more slowly than some of its advocates had anticipated.

Introduction

Historians of New Zealand education who have research interests in post-primary schooling policies and practices are generally in agreement that the Thomas Committee chose Frank Milner's curriculum proposals, presented to the New Zealand Secondary Schools' Association conference in March 1936, as being the natural starting point for its curriculum deliberations.¹ Although there is ample evidence to support this conclusion, we suggest that the 'Thomas' common core curriculum is better understood when the 'Milner' curriculum is placed alongside those factors which ultimately assisted the promotion of a common core curriculum ideology. The

educational policies laid down by the first Labour Ministry under Michael Savage (1935-1938); the rising public demand for easier access to post-primary schooling; official criticism of the academic hegemony exercised by secondary schools; the potential for undermining democratic values and lifestyles posed by totalitarian nations during World War Two; the government's efforts to raise the school leaving age to 15 years; and the educational justification advanced by officials of the Department of Education to support further intervention in post-primary schooling activities, constitute those factors which were especially influential in determining the nature and scope of curricular reform decided upon by the Thomas Committee in its report released in February 1944.²

By 1935, 'compulsory subject' status had been assigned by the Department of Education to English, History and Civics, Arithmetic, and Physical Training for all Form III and IV (junior) students in attendance at either a district high, technical high, or secondary school, i.e. at any type of post-primary school.³ Junior pupils were also required to choose one science subject and a foreign language if they attended a secondary school or a district high school.⁴ A small core as subjects, common to all post-primary schools, was therefore enforceable by Departmental personnel. These officers also believed that by retaining a wide range of subject options around which academic, agricultural, commercial, domestic, and industrial courses could be organised, the diverse educational and vocational needs of students could be catered for. Their thinking was not novel, given the many expressions of support from high school authorities for differentiated courses of instruction to be offered at a time when post-primary school enrolments were increasing. They had maintained that course differentiation was needed to attain social and educational efficiency⁵ and, to this end, they endorsed the philosophy of several contemporary American curriculum theorists.⁶ A particular difficulty, however, lay with the advocacy of a common core curriculum (whereby all junior pupils at all types of post-primary schools studied certain subjects in common) within the context of a schooling system dominated and shaped traditionally by national examinations.

The case for a core curriculum

A belief that the real agenda of the Department of Education involved prescribing high school curricula minutely led some educationalists to encourage high school authorities from the mid 1920s to introduce a comprehensive core curriculum by their own volition. Frank Milner, Rector of Waitaki Boys' High School, and James Strachan, Principle of Rangiora High School, were two prominent advocates of such a curriculum. Milner was adamant that "... a harmonious combination of the cultural and

the practical... in one organic whole” could occur only with a core curriculum in place. He had envisaged that such a combination was not likely to arise with rigidly differentiated courses.⁷ Milner was not opposed to curriculum differentiation per se, because he had assumed that this differentiation was indispensable to educating a large adolescent population.⁸ Strachan also upheld this view:

*Let us (have) a general course of instruction for all students, irrespective of (their) vocational ambitions... Let this course be supplemented by a number of optional vocational courses... without sacrificing the cultural and educational function of the school.*⁹

Both principals understood that while George Hogben and Richard Seddon’s free place system (first introduced in 1901) had opened up high schools to a much larger proportion of the youth population, most of these boys and girls were not academically inclined.¹⁰ Furthermore, most were likely to be short stay pupils only. Differentiated instruction achieved through discrete course offerings was often held, not surprisingly, to be the most ‘efficient’ mechanism to cope with this reality.¹¹ At the same time, the very real fears articulated by Milner and other spokespersons about threats to educational provision in a democracy and citizenship training served to ensure that the common core ideology would not be abandoned.

Milner was critical of the University Matriculation Examination, located in Form 5. He noted that this examination cast its shadow down to the junior school, and therefore functioned as an unofficial common core curriculum. Milner condemned high school staff for their tendency to see general education as being of lesser importance than examination work. In his assessment the ‘humanistic’ side of education was subordinated too often to the purely academic, the result being that the Matriculation syllabus did not represent a well-balanced general education curriculum.¹² Milner’s solution, on the one hand, was to provide for the common life-needs of adolescents through a prescribed core curriculum, and on the other hand to recognise individual difference through differentiated courses of instruction. In June 1936 he outlined the key points of his curriculum philosophy to the Annual Conference of the Secondary Schools’ Association:

*...the curriculum should contain a cultural core consisting of English, Social Studies, General Science, Health, Handwork, Art and Arithmetic ... all other subjects should be relegated to the sphere of prevocational options to be taken in accordance with individual needs and interests.*¹³

Milner added that “contingent upon the provision of satisfactory humanistic culture, each school should be free to draw up its own curriculum and organise its own courses to suit its special needs.”¹⁴ Milner, nevertheless, was careful to avoid being seen by other secondary school principals to be dictating the entire programme of

studies for every pupil. By way of safeguard he wrote that “contingent upon the provision of satisfactory humanistic culture, each school should be free to draw up its own curriculum and organise its won courses to suit its special needs”.¹⁵

The above concession notwithstanding, Milner firmly believed that many secondary school authorities had not attached priority status to a particular requirement of the Department of Education’s ‘Free Place Regulations’, as they were commonly labelled. This was the expectation that school principals would formulate courses that were tailor-made to the perceived abilities, interests, and needs of their male and female pupils. Like Strachan and Milner, the Department’s official stance was that high school teachers should concentrate more on catering for the growing number of non academic students they now attracted, because high school classes were no longer filled exclusively by academically minded youth.¹⁶ For Milner in particular, a core curriculum was equally as important in adolescents’ schooling as was the requirement to sort students into courses based upon their academic and practical aptitudes, their vocational ambitions, and their anticipated length of stay at a high school. If such a policy were subscribed to nationally then Milner was confident that ‘cultural’ (humanistic) and manual-technical studies would soon be regarded by school authorities and the populace as being equally valuable, complementary, activities.¹⁷

There was strong support for Milner’s curriculum philosophy within the Department. The post-primary inspectorate, throughout the 1930s, had encouraged high school principals to introduce “a greater variety of subjects” and to develop “the aesthetic, the emotional, and the creative side of [every] pupil’s life”.¹⁸ Principals, however, seldom responded promptly to this invitation because they understood the degree of public support for their credentialling services. Such a sentiment was echoed by the Rector of the Otago Boys’ High School in Dunedin in 1937, Harold Kidson, who shrewdly observed that:

*So great has the importance of examination qualifications become in this country that parents are afraid to allow their children to embark on a course that does not lead as directly as possible towards examination passes. The majority of the boys will go into commercial or industrial life, but there too employers have come to demand a pass in the University Entrance examination for so many positions.*¹⁹

Politics and school curricula

Labour party politicians, for their part, had long been aware of the relationship between national examinations and what was taught within post-primary schools. Although determined not to devalue academic instruction they were keen to put an end to “the difference between what is called academic education and technical education”.²⁰ Clyde Carr, Peter Fraser, Terence McCombs and Walter Nash, the

Labour party's education spokesperson, wanted to introduce "cultural" and "technical" studies into "a more extensive general education [programme]".²¹ These men were convinced that the benefits of a broad general education curriculum could be made available to more youth when accompanied by an increase in the school leaving age.²² There was general agreement that English, Geography, History, Art and Music should constitute the "core of subjects" around which a number of "vocational courses" could be created.²³

According to Fraser and his parliamentary colleagues, the core curriculum philosophy was best articulated in the model presented by Milner to the Secondary Schools' Association in 1936.²⁴ As Member of the House of Representatives for Lyttleton, McCombs was typical of those commentators who approved of Milner's curriculum:

*The most admirable set of courses that I know of was described to me by the headmaster of the Waitaki High School, Mr Milner... his ideal was to have a core of cultural subjects ... all other subjects would be treated as purely vocational courses If that attitude were adopted right throughout our secondary system there could be less objection to asking the children to follow it.*²⁵

Labour party politicians upheld Milner's thesis that several subjects had to be taught in common, albeit within "well defined courses", because this was deemed an essential ingredient in a democratic schooling system.²⁶ At the same time, however, they understood that there was some public support for courses to be differentiated in post-primary schools, support which could not be ignored. Peter Fraser, the Deputy Prime Minister and newly appointed Minister of Education, took careful note of the fact that Milner had insisted that high school authorities take the initiative in revising their curricular offerings on account of his firm opposition to curricula being specified centrally.²⁷ High schools were deprived of the opportunity to "draw up their own syllabuses and arrange courses to suit local conditions" when the Department sought to exercise control, Milner opined.²⁸ Such control was "a constricting influence", in his view. Milner told the Secondary Schools' Association that:

*[we must] mitigate the evils of standardisation consequent upon centralised bureaucratic control by a proper balance between central and local authority ... The least that should be conceded our schools is local freedom in curriculum organisation to suit local needs. Centralised uniform prescriptions of syllabuses is anathema to the liberal educator.*²⁹

The Waitaki Boy's High School Rector was not alone in expressing such a concern. the possibility of external curricular intervention prompted the Secondary

School Boards' Association and the New Zealand Registered Secondary Schools' Association to declare their support for "less rather than more control by the Department [of Education] of syllabuses of instruction".³⁰ The Minister of Education responded by declaring that his intention, and that of his government, did not involve extending control over secondary schooling. In his address to the Secondary School Boards' Association Annual Conference in April 1938 Fraser stated,

*... there is no danger of centralisation as far as the Department is concerned I have not the slightest desire to do that I wish to disabuse the minds of the Conference of any suspicion savouring of a desire to concentrate more power in the hands of the Department.*³¹

To further support his argument Fraser praised the philosophy behind the Department's Free Place Regulations, i.e. the principle of minimal compulsion in high school curricula. He noted that the regulations had been formulated to ensure that junior pupils would receive "instruction in what must be recognised by any educationalist as being the essential core of any secondary curriculum".³² The consequence was that for high school principals most activities were "absolutely untrammelled by Departmental requirements in [their] organisation of the timetable of [their] pupils".³³ The Minister, therefore, was not wishing to foist the Milner core curriculum upon schools.

Senior Departmental personnel tended to agree with Fraser. Edward Caradus and Edward Parr, two senior post-primary inspectors, recommended the existing "small compulsory core" be kept because it allowed schools to give their pupils "a choice of courses from which a selection may be made to suit the individual child".³⁴ The inspectors accepted Fraser's assertion that high schools "must offer courses that are as rich and varied as are the needs and abilities of the children who enter them".³⁵ They complimented Fraser for observing that curricular reform should take place without external pressure.³⁶

General education and curriculum differentiation

The Labour government's concern with course differentiation - based on the assumption that this was a "truly democratic" policy - deepened with the onset of war.³⁷ It was thought that a 'democratic' schooling system could become a reality only when it was available to the entire youth population. According to this argument, such a schooling system was possible only when all high schools adopted a comprehensive curriculum structure and the school leaving age was raised. The President of the New Zealand Secondary Schools' Association in 1938, James Hutton, envisaged that with these reforms in place "the whole population will come to our post-

primary schools".³⁸ But the President of the New Zealand Educational Institute, Norman Matheson, added a note of caution. He warned teachers that an immediate consequence of raising the school leaving age would be "an influx of non-academic types" into high schools. Matheson alerted educators to the urgent need for extensive course differentiation once pupils who were unable to "fit into the narrow groove of academicism" entered post-primary schools in large numbers.³⁹ The point was not lost on Fraser, however; he also felt that raising the school leaving age to 15 years would be of 'no use' without carefully redesigned school curricula being available.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding the Education Minister's acceptance of pupil differentiation, one factor remained to the fore - the government's desire to train boys and girls for their various roles in the workforce and society. Effective preparation for future citizenship occurred when more pupils were given post-primary education "of a kind for which [they are] best fitted",⁴¹ Fraser maintained. Course differentiation aside, he maintained that citizenship training was more likely to be effective when pupils studied the following subjects in common: History and Civics, Geography, Home Science, Physical Education, and manual work.⁴² Although these were clear government preferences, post-primary inspectors were unwilling to proceed beyond issuing "strong recommendations" to schools about their curricula and to give them "encouragement and full support" whenever curricular reforms were being contemplated.⁴³ School authorities had often been told that manual work provided boys and girls with valuable "character training",⁴⁴ besides teaching them about the "profitable use [of leisure time]".⁴⁵ Home Science - a compulsory subject for girls in Forms III and IV from 1917 - was also tied in with civics instruction because Departmental officers believed that it offered girls "a very valuable training for after life".⁴⁶ Similarly, Physical Education (another compulsory subject) was credited with developing civic values. Its advocates argued that the subject allowed pupils to show "a consideration for the rights of others", as well as encouraging boys and girls to "undertake responsibilities" and to "exhibit initiative and leadership".⁴⁷

There is no doubt that the Department of Education post-primary inspectorate and the Labour government regarded Milner's curriculum model - with its advocacy of a core of studies and its acceptance of differentiation, as being ideally suited to educating a diverse adolescent population. Fraser was adamant that the public expected schools to sort their pupils into discrete courses, and he hoped that Milner's curriculum would be adopted by school authorities without requiring compulsion. Such a view was endorsed by Fraser's successor, Henry Mason. In 1940, his first year as Education Minister, Mason reported that "certainly at the present stage the best control

lies not so much in restrictions as in positive professional leadership".⁴⁸ New Zealand's involvement in international war had once again prompted the fear that young boys and girls could easily "slip out of school" before their formal education was completed.⁴⁹ Having remarked earlier that the task of educating a young citizenry was "a social necessity and no mere luxury",⁵⁰ Mason was convinced that in the matter of raising the school leaving age government intervention was fully justified:

*I would prefer to raise the school age now when the need is greatest ... owing to war conditions there are an increasing number of young adolescents who are missing the discipline of a normal home, and it is essential that the school keep its grip upon them during these very critical years, even if it cannot give them quite the facilities one would wish for.*⁵¹

The Minister's explanation was generally accepted by politicians and the press.⁵² Mason knew that if pupils were to benefit from this reform high schools would have no choice but to "devise courses of study fitted to the needs and interests of the non-academic type [of adolescent]".⁵³ He predicted that the popular demand for school authorities to offer and promote a variety of courses would force them to react accordingly. In the meantime the government and the post-primary inspectorate were alert to the traditional public expectation that if any change in educational policy was implemented then the needs of the academically-inclined minority of pupils must not be sacrificed. These were pupils who would be candidates for the new Form VI University Entrance Examination⁵⁴ and for whom academic subjects had to be provided in the Department's own examination, School Certificate, which was sat by a minority of students in their Fifth Form year.⁵⁵ To make matters more complicated, the latter examination - in existence since 1934 - was also given the task of marking out "a complete secondary education" for those boys and girls not wishing to enter a university.⁵⁶ It was envisaged that these pupils would sit the Department's examination in their fourth year at a post-primary school. Mason held that the successful operation of the School Certificate Examination depended upon having "[a] choice of subjects, both academic and practical, [which] will be so wide that every pupil should be able to take a course for which his [or her] own powers and limitations best fit him [or her]".⁵⁷

The Thomas Committee

Making provision for both academic and non-academic pupils was necessary, Mason declared, once the raised school leaving age came into operation. For the first

time it would “[make] some period of secondary education compulsory for nearly all children”.⁵⁸ The Minister knew that post-primary curricula needed to be examined carefully if the School Certificate Examination was to be successful and if post-primary schools were not to be dominated in the future by the University Entrance Examination syllabus.⁵⁹ Taken together, these factors led Mason in 1943 to restate Milner’s philosophy of schooling:

*... the post-primary school has two functions of equal importance - the first, to prepare the few for higher education, and the second, to prepare the many for immediate participation in the life and work of the community. To perform this second function to the full it will probably be necessary to make considerable changes in the curriculum of some of the post-primary schools. Fortunately, there is now nothing to prevent the Department and the schools from making such changes.*⁶⁰

Mason appreciated, however that Milner’s curriculum had made reference to secondary schools only.⁶¹ A further reason for extending its application to all types of high school was now required. The reason was the government’s policy to use the various post-primary schools as instruments to prepare all youth for their forthcoming citizenship. Accepting the advice tendered by the recently-appointed Director of Education, Dr Clarence Beeby, Mason appointed “a specially constituted committee” [the Thomas Committee] in November 1942, confident that it would endorse the Milner curriculum. The Committee was chaired by William Thomas, a former Rector of the Timaru Boys’ High School, known in secondary schooling circles for his liberal views on reforming school curricula. The terms of reference laid down by the Minister of Education included advising the government about the changes that ought to be made to the School Certificate Examination as well as suggesting specific curricular reforms.⁶²

Mason was particularly keen to see schools adopt Milner’s curriculum proposals. He had stated in 1943 that “the Government is most anxious that full advantage should be taken of the opportunity [presented for curricula re-evaluation]” through the amendments recently made to the University Entrance Examination.⁶³ The Director of Education, whose views on educational reform were already well known to educationists, was also determined to ensure that the Thomas Committee appreciated the merits of the Milner model. Beeby had emphasised the importance of educating the ‘average’ pupil in every school that claimed to be democratic; he had concluded that “[the idea of having] a democracy with an uneducated populace is inconceivable”.⁶⁴ In November 1942 Beeby reminded the Thomas Committee of the Labour Government’s education objectives, and drew their attention to the new order of priorities that would inevitably accompany post-primary education for all pupils:

The Government’s definite policy is that the general interests of the

majority of pupils must not be sacrificed to the special interests of the few . The Department is anxious to maintain high academic standards for the scholarly, but even this end must not be allowed to interfere with the schools' main function of giving a full and realistic education [to pupils].⁶⁵

Beeby then asserted that “the community cannot afford to have citizens who are lacking a certain common core of knowledge and barren of certain experiences that seem essential to intelligent participation in communal activities”. He was firmly convinced that Milner’s “cultural core” should be studied by all pupils “as part of their social apprenticeship”,⁶⁶ although Beeby did concede that there were difficulties in making decisions about curricular content.

The curriculum is already so crowded that, quite apart from the crisis precipitated by the introduction of accrediting [for the University Entrance Examination], the decision to pronounce some subjects essential and others non-essential would have been forced upon us sooner or later by those responsible for the increasingly difficult task of making up teaching timetables.⁶⁷

The Director of Education then proceeded to declare that adolescents could not be “... safely let loose on the community” without having studied English, Arithmetic, History, Geography, Health, General Science, Music, Art and one handicraft subject. In order to ensure proper citizenship preparation the core curriculum should be a feature of every type of high school. To emphasise the point he told the Thomas Committee of “the necessity to include the technical schools in the scheme”.⁶⁸ To this end Beeby was alluding to the importance of a *common* core curriculum. He was also anxious to ensure that the Free Place Regulations would be re-examined by the Committee, in the belief that “the non-examination subjects [must be] given their proper emphasis in the examination year when they are competing for time with examination subjects”.⁶⁹ Thus, Beeby ‘persuaded’ the committee to view the common core subjects not taken by pupils for the School Certificate Examination as being important studies in their own right. In other words, they were to be an indispensable part of the general education programme for every high school student.⁷⁰

A curriculum for a democracy?

In November 1943 the Thomas Committee presented their report to the Minister of Education. Not surprisingly, the report echoed Beeby’s sentiments; it professed firm support for both a common core curriculum and the notion that schools cater fully for the non-academically minded pupil majority. The Committee noted, however, that “the special interests of the few” were not to be overlooked or down played by school

authorities. They were insistent that regardless of pupils aptitudes and interests a common core curriculum was to be offered:

That up the School Certificate stage the curricula of all full-time pupils in post-primary schools include a core of studies and activities comprising English Language and Literature; Social Studies [preferably an integrated course of History and Civics, Geography, and some descriptive economics]; General Science; Elementary Mathematics; Music; a Craft or one of the Fine Arts; and Physical Education. For girls Home Crafts are regarded as satisfying the requirement of 'a craft'.⁷¹

The committee members were in no doubt that all youth had several “common needs”, and concluded that these needs would be addressed through a general education curriculum. By the committee’s own admission the common core was “very similar” to the core curriculum drafted by Milner.⁷² Moreover, the core subjects for pupils attending either a technical high, district high, or a secondary school were to be identical in name, although principals were still to retain the power to determine the actual subject matter. The Committee, nevertheless, reminded high school authorities of their obligation to provide students with “experiences that are needed for full and healthy growth” - subjects that could make a social, physical, and aesthetic contribution to pupils’ education while also possessing intellectual merit.⁷³ Given that this philosophy underpinned the Thomas Committee’s deliberations, it was only to be expected that they would report in favour of insisting on certain minimum curriculum requirements.⁷⁴ In other words, the Committee accepted the principle that the government should function as “trustee for the community” because it took for granted the state’s right to have some control over post-primary school curricula.⁷⁵ The Committee’s recognition of the fact that since 1908 the Free Place Regulations had insisted upon giving “certain minimum allotments of time to ‘general’ subjects” also prompted them to argue that a strong case remained for recommending that some subjects be made compulsory.⁷⁶

The Committee’s resolve was strengthened by their observation that war with Germany presented a direct threat to “life in a modern democratic community”. They commented on the need to “give adolescents a richer and better balanced education than they have had in the past”, and urged that “basic values” or “general aims” be promoted in high schools.⁷⁷ They had in mind emphasising ideals such as strength and stability of character, self-discipline, social responsibility, and person worth.⁷⁸ The Thomas Committee was convinced that the acquisition of a general education - depicted in a compulsory common core curriculum - would enable adolescents to participate in New Zealand society as “workers, neighbours, homemakers, and citizens”.⁷⁹ The school

system was the best instrument to promote these democratic ideals, according to the Committee:

*The human values we sum up in the word 'democracy' have too much been taken for granted. They are still threatened from without, and only active effort and unceasing vigilance can make them more secure within. The schools thus have the overriding duty of helping pupils to understand them and live in accordance with them, in other words of assisting to build up a democratic society capable both of defending its essential values and of widening and deepening their influence.*⁸⁰

This policy was clearly influenced by Beeby, who had told the Thomas Committee at their initial meeting that “in the light of recent events” a common core curriculum was essential.⁸¹ In short, the official desire to uphold democratic principles was seen as justification for recommending some official curricular intervention by means of a compulsory curriculum.

There was, however, a limit to the extent to which common curriculum offerings were seen as being the sole solution to the problem of educating teenagers for living in a democracy. Because the vocational aspirations of pupils had to be considered,⁸² the Thomas Committee maintained that the retention of the three types of high school (most of which offered a wide range of non-core subjects) could hardly fail to assist in the preparation of adolescents for their entry to the workforce. Milner, it must be remembered, had not interrogated this assumption in the preceding decade. The Committee, for their part, were careful to allay any criticism that the Labour government was intent upon “imposing a cut-and-dried philosophy on the schools” by emphasising that school principals were still to have authority to design programmes to suit individual pupil requirements.⁸³ They were confident, therefore, that a curriculum had been devised to take account of both individual school and state interests.

The new School Certificate Examination

With regard to providing for individual students' needs the Thomas committee assumed that post-primary school authorities would wish to continue to differentiate between their pupils on the basis of perceived difference in academic and practical talents. In their opinion two broad categories of pupils existed: The “intellectually bright minority” who responded well to traditional academic teaching, and the “ordinary pupil (who learned best through) methods that gave scope to his (or her) urge to be doing things”.⁸⁴ Echoing a belief that girls and boys had “varying needs and abilities”,⁸⁵ the committee concluded that both core and optional studies would allow schools to cater for individual differences.⁸⁶ It was thought that the wide range of optional studies listed for the School Certificate Examination - subjects familiar to high

school teachers - would encompass “all the main types of intellectual interest”.⁸⁷ Furthermore, both the Committee and the Department of Education wanted this examination to now succeed in establishing a market niche for itself as a worthwhile credential for school leavers to hold. The Committee appreciated that the status of School Certificate finally rested on it being seen publicly as “a guarantee of a satisfactory level of general education”.⁸⁸ It has not formerly gained a strong public following, as argued elsewhere.⁸⁹ Accordingly, they recommended that Department of Education officials in future withhold awarding pupils their School Certificate until Post-primary school principals could demonstrate that School Certificate candidates had pursued “a broad and realistic course” by studying core subjects.⁹⁰

Introduction of the common core curriculum was to be one feature of post-primary schooling that was not negotiable. In practice, what the committee had set out to achieve was to design a curriculum in which core studies were located alongside carefully selected optional subjects, one in which all post-primary school authorities were expected to audit their programmes systematically. They acknowledged the popular appeal of academic courses, and suggested that while they still had to be offered schools should begin to market other courses more vigorously.⁹¹ There was satisfaction among Committee members that they had come up with a viable curriculum ‘formula’:

*... [for] the broad objectives of the scheme we recommend ... there is strong support in the teaching services, in the post-primary inspectorate, and among informed laymen, and we believe that the scheme itself, if put into operation, would be of assistance in achieving them. The best of our schools have already led the way, and we have in mind little that is not found in successful operation somewhere or other in New Zealand ...*⁹²

Mason moved swiftly to lend political support to the report. He was convinced that it had succeeded in establishing “a desirable basis for the new curriculum for post-primary schools”, and concluded that the common core and the proposed School Certificate Examination syllabus should be granted legislative recognition.⁹³ In his 1944 annual report to Parliament Mason announced that these two features would be incorporated into regulations taking effect from 1946, although he was sensitive to the need to be seen to consult with the high school authorities and other interested parties.⁹⁴ The Minister’s desire to depict the Department of Education as being a minimally interventionist governmental agency was clearly apparent when he wrote in the foreword to the Thomas Report that,

What is actually done [in changing the curricula of post-primary schools] will depend mainly on the efforts of the schools themselves,

*but these efforts will inevitably be influenced, and may to some extent be stimulated and guided, by administrative action.*⁹⁵

Citizenship education

The Minister took care not to stress the Department's role in direct decision-making regarding school curricula.⁹⁶ Instead, he sought to promote the idea that high school authorities, after negotiation with their respective communities, should continue to reorganise their curricula to meet the educational and vocational intentions of their pupils. In so doing they would then uphold the spirit of the Thomas Committee's recommendations, Mason observed. A concern not to appear autocratic led the Education Minister to inform the House of Representatives of his belief that

*... genuine advances in education, although they may be fostered by a Government, cannot simply radiate from some central authority. The great bulk of the people must not only understand what is afoot, but must also take an active part in working out the kind of education system they want for themselves and their children.*⁹⁷

Mason, like Beeby, was firmly wedded to the idea that adolescents' citizenship training was crucial to the preservation of democracy. In his first ministerial report in 1940, Mason's expectation was that teachers would actively instil in all pupils "a passionate belief in the fundamental human values for which democracy stands".⁹⁸ The government's approach was clearly discernible at least to the Waitaki High Schools' Board of Governors, who, in 1939, passed the following resolution:

*Democracy is based on independent and thinking minds ... it is surely the plain duty of every teacher in a democratic country within the British liberty, the sacredness of personality, and loyalty to throne and constitution. Our schools must surely, while safeguarding independent thinking, counterbalance totalitarian education by endowing our pupils with faith in democratic principles. Our pupils should learn to appreciate the differences between governing by force of argument and governing by force of arms.*⁹⁹

The Department's response was to inform all New Zealand schools through the *Education Gazette* that the Waitaki Board's resolution amounted to "a fair and balanced pronouncement on the duties of teachers".¹⁰⁰

As warfare intensified Mason again drew politicians' attention to a central premise that "too much stress cannot be put upon the necessity of making our children good citizens". He also left them in no doubt about his expectation that "all those engaged in education will give a foremost place to that sentiment".¹⁰¹ There was no Ministerial desire to push for total state control over post-primary curricula, however.

To have done so would have invited the accusation that schooling was then “in complete subservience to the state”.¹⁰² Support for this view is provided by Mason’s previous announcement that the Labour government would not resort to “the methods used in the totalitarian states” to raise the public consciousness about the value to democratic life.¹⁰³ It is reasonable to suggest that the threat to democracy offered by the emergence of totalitarian politics and practices was taken seriously in New Zealand because of its professed support for egalitarianism. The policy adopted was for the government to regard teachers as being effective agents of adolescent socialisation; individually and collectively, they were to remind pupils of their “responsibilities to the community and to [their] country” while also maintaining “a deep conviction to the value of the individual”.¹⁰⁴ These messages were also to be delivered through the new common core curriculum. In Mason’s opinion, the success of the proposed curriculum depended upon establishing a firm association between individuals and the wider society.

The government’s acceptance of the Thomas Committee’s recommendations carried with it a ministerial and inspectorial assumption that teachers would be able to rise to the new challenges presented to them.¹⁰⁵ In the process of informing the teaching profession of their special role in making the Thomas curriculum philosophy a reality, Mason indicated a clear preference for having the Department of Education remain in the background:

*When the regulations have been passed, the main task of finding answers to the many pedagogical questions arising from the changes will lie with the teachers. I want them to feel free to work out their own solutions. The department and its inspectors will give them whatever help they can.*¹⁰⁶

This ‘freedom’ was conditional, teachers were told. It was accompanied by an expectation that post-primary school teachers “make the fullest use of the new opportunities offered them” that is, they would take the “hard road” outlined by the Thomas Committee and not the ‘soft’.¹⁰⁷ By following the “hard road” it was thought that teachers could succeed in countering the strong market demand for early specialisation in pupils’ studies, thus enabling the common core curriculum to work in the way the Committee had thought desirable.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the prescribing of a compulsory general education programme of study was seen by the Committee as “an essential safeguard of the whole scheme”. General education considerations, the Committee stressed, must not be ignored by proponents of specialised instruction.¹⁰⁹

Although confident that teachers had the ability and the will to adapt to change,

Mason sensed that in most cases this would take time. Believing that the speed with which curricular changes could be implemented determined their success in the nation's classrooms, he concluded in favour of allowing a consolidation period for teachers. In 1946 Mason wrote:

*I do not anticipate any marked changes in policy in the post-primary schools during the next five years. The schools must be given time to adjust themselves to the changes in the post-primary curriculum that have been effected over the past two or three years.*¹¹⁰

The Labour Government was therefore fully convinced that it could not realistically force the pace of national curricular reform. Mason had already recognised this fact; in 1945 he had announced that "true advances in education cannot be produced by regulations or administrative fiat".¹¹¹ In other words, the Minister was of the view that a sympathetic and informed public was essential if the Thomas curriculum was to function properly. The difficult task thus presented to the nation's educators, with the introduction of the raised school leaving age, was to educate the total adolescent population,¹¹² as Phoebe Meikle shrewdly observed some 15 years later:

*[Notwithstanding] its liberal humanism, idealism and genuine democratic feeling ... the [Thomas] report could be no more than a book of suggested recipes presented to the nation for experimental use by many cooks of varying abilities and purposes.*¹¹³

The aftermath of the Thomas Report

The wide variation in teachers' abilities and schooling philosophies militated against the smooth translation of the Thomas curriculum from policy to practice. Furthermore, the general education philosophy underpinning the Committee's recommendations was displaced mainly because post-primary school teachers had to contend with an unexpectedly high public demand for access to national school credentials (especially the revised School Certificate Examination) once pupils chose to remain at school for a longer duration.¹¹⁴ Within a decade, high school authorities were forced to respond by giving specialised instruction priority over the general education curriculum earlier in pupils' schooling than the Thomas Committee had thought necessary.¹¹⁵ Meikle attributed this unfortunate development to the School Certificate Examination gaining an identity as "the symbol of intellectual normality", with the predictable consequence that an "absurdly exaggerated importance" was soon attached to it.¹¹⁶ Nearly 50 years after the release of the Thomas Report Beeby remarked that "a heavy burden was put on the individual schools" - sufficiently heavy, in fact, for him to conclude that "only in retrospect do I fully realise how much we were

asking of the schools".¹¹⁷

The task of "educating a nation" post World War Two proved to be equally as demanding as that facing educators and administrators when free primary schooling was first introduced into New Zealand last century. As Director of Education (1940-1960), Beeby had anticipated difficulties on many fronts, although he remained confident that the Thomas Committee's recommendations were key ingredients in "an all-or-nothing operation that could not be introduced piecemeal".¹¹⁸ Debate, Beeby reminds us, occurred mostly over the length of the School Certificate Examination course and the duration of the common core curriculum; the role of the Department of Education in promoting change; and the new functions assigned to post-primary schools.¹¹⁹ These debates were sufficiently complex for Beeby to conclude that not only was reform in the post-primary sector "a matter not of years but of decades and even generations" but also that "the further one goes up through the school system the slower change becomes".¹²⁰ Post-primary staff, in the main, *did* take considerable time to adjust to their new environment; Beeby clearly understood that the real success of the Thomas Committee's reforms depended upon gathering teachers' support for them, and that such support was not immediately forthcoming. He concluded:

*Paradoxically, the teaching profession imposes the greatest restraint on major educational change, and yet offers the only means of bringing it about only [post-primary] teachers could take the final step.*¹²¹

In the context of contemporary debate about the New Zealand national curriculum, we suggest, Beeby's assertion is a pertinent in 1996 as it was one-half a century ago.

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