

# Teachers and Curriculum



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

VOLUME 9 2006



# TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

## KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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VOLUME 9 2006

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# COMMENTARY

## WHOSE INTERESTS ARE SERVED? VALUES IN THE DRAFT CURRICULUM

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In this document, a politically biased agenda is obvious. The "Vision" (p. 8) states that the new curriculum is geared to "the growth of [the] economy". Despite lists of "principles" and "values", many of which are high minded, the real values of this curriculum lie not in abstract words (which have little meaning and are unlikely to have any real effect in schools), but in the authority it gives for one section of society, that is the business sector, to make further inroads into schools. I refer to the focus on "entrepreneurship" and the school's role in fostering it. This is quite a different value from all the others that are specified, for unlike others like "enterprising" and "resilient", which can be relevant in many contexts, it has its logical home in the rhetoric of business. An entrepreneur, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is "one who undertakes or controls a business or enterprise and *bears the risk of profits and losses*" (emphasis mine).

At first sight, it is hard to understand why this particular value is given central place in the school curriculum in 2006 having not appeared overtly in any earlier curriculum document over almost 100 years. But, on reflection, the answer is quite clear. For some years now, lobbyists have been working strenuously to take over the education system in the interests of business. This campaign is far advanced in the tertiary sector. Alliances between tertiary institutions and business are now common. Indeed, it might be said that universities and polytechnics are now little more than vast business schools. Results overseas have been worrying. In the United States, academics have been forbidden to publish findings which go against the interests of the businesses with which the university is in partnership. In many countries faculty members are now too scared to speak out on controversial issues for fear of losing crucial support from the world of business. Thus the university is unable to exert its role as "critic and conscience of society."

Within the compulsory schooling setting, the activity of business has been more circumspect. It has been largely secretive, carried on by lobby groups within the government and Ministry of Education with little discussion in the schools or the community: it has come by stealth. For many, the draft curriculum may be their first real confrontation with it.

As a result of the campaign:

- There are business sponsorships of schools and "partnerships" between schools and business, even extending to naming rights.
- Principals and teacher groups meet in expensive resorts with lavish lunches subsidised by business. Throughout the day, there are "spots" for business firms to advertise their wares. These professionals are being cynically "bought" by business interests.
- Products are advertised and even sold in the school itself. From time to time, there is a fuss about a particular product (one containing too much fat or sugar), but it is rarely noted that all such targeting to a captive audience (present under legal compulsion) is clearly unethical.
- Programmes such as the Primary Enterprise Programme have been introduced into schools with little or no opposition. Put crudely, the aim of these programmes is to ensure that our children are to be indoctrinated with the values of business and "the market." Although there is talk of "integrating" the learning areas and promoting democratic participation, the main aim of the scheme is to help the children to participate "in a competitive world economy." A major strand of the PrEP, for example, is to allow for the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services in the school society. The school is thus becoming a training ground for a narrow commercialism.

Teachers who have been involved in these programmes are often enthusiastic; they find that the students are highly motivated and eager to learn, the studies seem clearly relevant to the students' lives, and the programmes facilitate the desirable aim of integrating the diverse curriculum. Sadly many teachers, especially younger

teachers, have (also thanks in part to the lobbying of business interests) been subjected to a narrow and technicist form of teacher training. Deprived of studies in history, sociology, philosophy and politics they are ill prepared to see beyond enthusiastic faces and vibrant classrooms to the deeper social significance of what they are doing to the children with whom they are entrusted. Devoid of contextual understanding and critical tools, these teachers rarely ask questions such as: What are the children *really* learning? and, Is it ethically defensible?

This is very sad, for a key duty of the teacher is to **care** for their students and to protect them from those who would use them for their own purposes. New Zealanders have always been wary of attempts by pressure groups to gain access to schools to indoctrinate young people with sectional values and beliefs. As long ago as the 1877 Education Act, parents were able to withdraw their child from primary school history lessons. This was to ensure that children were not subjected to a partisan account of history. The long-standing secularity of state schools was not based on antipathy to religion but on concern lest zealots use the schools to promote particular faiths. Similarly, governments have been appropriately cautious on sex education, delaying it until more senior classes and surrounding it with guidelines to prevent promotion of partisan views. Special steps are taken to ensure that programmes have the approval of parents and if parents do not approve they have the right to withdraw their children.

In the new regime, local communities will be required to adapt this draft curriculum to local conditions (see for example, p. 26). Emboldened by the talk of "entrepreneurship", local business people will be only too ready to advise the school. It is imperative that other members of the school community, most of whom will be wage earners (often on a minimum wage), make their voices heard. Otherwise the message of the school will be that profit-making is the only genuine value. If teachers, who are professionally charged with caring for young people, neglect that duty, parents, caregivers, and community members must step in and demand that children be protected.

The war which is now being waged here has been carried on very successfully in American schools for many years.

As a result:

- School boards are stripping money from music and physical education to buy well-advertised hi-tech equipment.
- Companies are campaigning so that their brand promotion becomes the central core of the whole curriculum.
- A television channel has access to countless schools with two minutes of teen-directed advertisements over the school video system every day. All students must watch and no one may interrupt. Teachers are unable to switch it off, moderate the sound, or comment on the content.
- Well-known fast food chains are supplying their products to school cafeterias. The chains do not accept food vouchers given to poor families. Poor children must eat "ordinary food" while their more affluent friends eat pizza and Big Macs.
- Schools offer such things as a Coca Cola day: all students wear appropriate T-shirts, pose for photos in a Coca Cola formation, and listen to promotional lectures from company executives.
- In these schools, organisations such as Amnesty International have been forbidden to speak because they might criticise the activities of the multinational companies.

The result is that the school cannot perform its **educational role**: tied to business, it cannot subject society and its values to critical scrutiny and cannot prepare young people to be intelligent consumers and critical citizens.

Things have not come to that in New Zealand, but the Primary Enterprise Programme is an ominous sign. The primary school is being seen as a junior market in which young children produce, distribute and consume and, at the same time, imbue the values of profit-making and control. **The draft curriculum will make this official.**

In the twenty-first century, it is tiresome to have to say again (as was said in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries): schools are not places for supporting sectional interests. They are places for the impartial discussion and evaluation

of all interests and these should include the activities of businesses as well as the unions, political parties and civic organisations. No groups should have privileged status in the school.

Catholic state-integrated schools should take particular care. On Catholic Education Day in 2000, Cardinal Williams said in a public statement:

At a time when education is no longer seen as a process which enriches the lives of individuals and society but rather as a means of turning out 'products' to meet the market needs of the day, our Catholic schools are doing all possible to withstand the thrust towards consumerism (Williams, 2000).

Clearly, programmes which consciously **promote** consumerism should have no place in such schools.

But non-integrated state schools have equal reason to exclude business programmes. State schools serve a diverse society, and their special role is to respect that diversity and prepare young people for it. Many parents are workers, union members, unemployed, or on a benefit. The school should represent them, and not just those who control the major resources of our society. The essential function of schools, especially in a democratic society, is to foster critical thinkers, discerning consumers, and perceptive citizens. Schools should be actively helping young people to see how minds are manipulated by advertisers, marketers, politicians and ideologues of various kinds. Schools can do that only if they are free. Handing them over to one powerful interest group leaves them unable to truly educate.

The Picot reforms were designed to give more power to parents, not to corporations. Board members and other parents should make this a serious issue in their school. Principal associations should debate this very important matter and the teacher associations should fight to ensure that teachers are free to examine interest groups of all kinds and to teach their students to think critically. Members of trade unions should ask why the interests of employers are represented in schools but the interests of employees are not.

The centrality of business in the draft curriculum distorts many of the learning areas. Although there is mention of critical thinking (see for example, pp. 10-11) there is a total absence of those wider contexts which might make that possible. Barring a few references (e.g. to globalisation and to Maori), it could be the curriculum of any school system, in almost any country at any time. The curriculum statements regarding the learning areas are

consequently deficient both in what they say and what they omit. The following are some examples.

- In Social Sciences (p. 22) students must “understand their place in the economic world” (author/original emphasis?). There is no acknowledgement that they should be able to critically examine (even reject) their “place”. Globalisation is mentioned only as a positive reality, with no awareness that, as George, puts it, it enables the world market to “take the best and leave the rest” (2003, p. 16). Around the world, thousands protest at the effects of globalisation on developing countries and on the poorest members of society. These rival claims need to be examined, but they are unlikely to be critically assessed if business and “entrepreneurship” rule the curriculum.
- In Health and Physical Education, students at Level Six are to “investigate the organisations... which promote well being and environmental safety”. Should they not also investigate the organisations which systematically undermine health and safety? The drug, tobacco and alcohol industries come readily to mind but other business enterprises endanger the health of their workers and of the people living nearby. Marketers are targeting young people in every way (through the media, in video games, texts, etc.) and are now wanting to have access to the schools themselves. To be fair, the curriculum recognises the importance of studying “the factors that influence the health of individuals” (p.17) but this has to be made much more concrete. It is widely recognised that poverty and poor housing are major causes of ill-health and that the activities of “entrepreneurs” drive up the price of housing. The health curriculum should seriously examine this, but is unlikely to do so when business has a special say in what is taught.
- In Technology there is vague talk of “historical and contemporary technological developments in terms of their intellectual, social, technical, and environmental impacts and implications” (p. 23), but there is no recognition of the fact that technology is far from benign: it has produced nuclear weapons, health-destroying drugs, and environmental pollution. Even

when the technologies seem benign, care is needed. As Postman wrote:

What we need to know about cars—as we need to know about computers, television and other important technologies—is not how to use them but how they use us. In the case of cars, what we needed to think about in the early twentieth century was not how to drive them but what they would do to our air, our landscape, our social relations, our family life, our cities (1995, p. 44).

It is interesting to note that while “care for the environment” is given as a value (p.10), there is no recognition that “entrepreneurs” have done more than most to damage the environment, and, some would say, damage it beyond repair.

- Although the English curriculum speaks of students who are “able to think deeply and critically” (p.15), no direction is given as to how this can be achieved. Surely, a major objective of English teaching is to help young people to detect the many ways in which language is used to force people to feel and think in particular ways. Our society is replete with the language of persuasion: political, religious, ideological and business. A major task of schooling is to alert young people to these pervasive influences and provide them with the intellectual tools to examine them critically. But all this is muted in this draft curriculum for it is centrally dedicated to the celebration of profit-making (“entrepreneurs”) and this absolutely demands that no questions are asked about propaganda because that is central to most, if not all, business endeavour.
- Science acknowledges that the scientific perspective so important for our future must be “informed by social and ethical principles” (p. 20), but this is not followed up: in science, for example, we have philosophical debates about the nature of theories, political debates about evolution, and ethical debates about stem cell research and genetic modification. This curriculum, however, does not recognise these debates. It regards science (and, for that matter, technology) as unproblematic and non-political. As long as the business model predominates, these deeper questions cannot be asked and genuine education can not occur.
- Finally, what about Mathematics and Statistics? Surely this area should be uncontroversial: but it is not. Statistics are now frequently used to back up political positions (e.g. Maori are disposed towards violence; crime figures show that stiffer sentences deter crime). Rarely do statistics support such assertions. A healthy scepticism towards statistics as used in politics and advertising is urgently needed, but the suggestion that statistics is a neutral activity serves dominant interests. Hence this learning area described in the draft curriculum is as bland as one would expect from a curriculum which is geared to serving the interests of business.

Most of the values which are sprinkled through the curriculum will have little effect on children. Who, for example, is going to fight to have diversity, social justice, or integrity brought to life in the day-to-day life of the school? In contradistinction to these rather empty values, “entrepreneurship” is a **political slogan**. It is in the curriculum because it allows the Trojan horse of business direct access to the school. Not surprisingly, the draft curriculum was barely off the press when the Ministry of Education called a meeting of business interests to discuss how they might give effect to this curriculum. The Ministry did not, as far as I am aware, call parallel meetings with unions, voluntary organisations, or groups interested in preserving the environment or working for social justice. Clearly, the Ministry has become captive to an ideological movement which aims to tie all schooling to the interests of business. **The draft curriculum serves these interests.**

If the highly contentious slogan of entrepreneurship remains in the draft curriculum (as I suspect it will, because the forces behind it are very powerful) I offer the following suggestions.

- Unions and other interested parties should mount a campaign to have their materials included in any business programme: if schools are to be directly political, the employees have as much right to be heard as the employers.
- Teachers should work to subvert certain aspects of the curriculum (as some already do) by subjecting the programme to constant questions and critiques such as “What has business done for the water supply or for health in developing countries?”

- Parents should demand a conscience clause as there is for religious instruction since the same principle applies: the programmes pre- suppose a controversial values system.

After all, the minds and hearts of our young people are at stake.

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