

# Teachers and Curriculum



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# TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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*Teachers and Curriculum* provides an avenue for the publication of papers that:

- raise important issues to do with the curriculum
- report on research in the area of curriculum
- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
- review books that have a curriculum focus.

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# THE TIMID CURRICULUM

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the forward sounding statements which accompanied the release of the new curriculum, it is in fact a timid, backward looking document, ill-suited to the challenges of the twenty-first century. In his press release accompanying the new curriculum the Minister of Education, Steve Maharey stated that "we live in a world of globalisation, cultural diversity, and rapidly changing technologies... There are new social roles and new forms of self-expression". Sadly, however, the curriculum itself does not address these challenges. Although early statements in the document (relating to the "vision", "principles" and "values,") mention environmental issues, sustainability, international citizenship, and globalisation, these are not followed through in the various learning areas.

I would expect a curriculum for the twenty-first century to have as its focus climate change ("global warming"), globalisation, and the massive influence of technology (including the media) on people's lives. Young people need to understand these realities, view them critically, and be encouraged to influence the future in positive ways. Of course they must master the basic disciplines (referred to misleadingly as "learning areas") but these must be presented in ways which illuminate their lives. The new curriculum fails to adequately address any of the major issues of our day.

**Climate change** has recently been described by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, as "the moral challenge of our generation." He went on to say that "succeeding generations depend on us. We cannot rob our children of their future" (Dominion Post, December 13, 2007). The curriculum should have approached this with a sense of urgency: unless the current generation of school students gets to understand this, the future of the human race is in doubt. It is true, of course, that there are differing views as to the nature and severity of the crisis but it is only by understanding the science and the politics of the climate change debate that our young people will be able to approach it in an informed way. Indeed, the controversial nature of this area is itself an excellent reason for making it central as it can motivate students to study the natural sciences, social sciences, languages, and technology and the relationship between them. All are intimately involved in this pressing issue. Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* should be viewed by all students. Yes, there are mistakes in the movie, but a sound educative programme will reveal these mistakes, seek to explain them, and work to correct them.

**Globalisation** is a serious challenge to the people of the world.: there is the globalisation of power (e.g. the wealth of Exxon at \$110 billion and Ford at \$137 billion outstrip the GNP of Portugal on \$30 billion and even 'wealthy' Sweden on \$100 billion); the globalisation of culture (films, television, language swamp us); the globalisation of poverty and wealth (e.g. 23% of the world's population live in absolute poverty but there are thousand of millionaires in India and the life expectancy of men in Harlem is lower than in Bangladesh); the globalisation of labour (firms move their factories to the lowest priced places; firms are mobile but labour is not); the globalisation of meanness (e.g. while in the 1970s, the NZ government aimed to give 1% of GDP to aid, it now reaches only .3% and while Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands give .7%, Britain gives .3% and USA a miserly .15% ,while trumpeting their generosity.) In addition, free trade agreements such as GATTs threaten not only local industry and workers but also the status of local schools and locally trained teachers. And yet, this massive phenomenon is in no way central in this curriculum. A mere mention of the word "globalisation" fails to convey the urgency of the problems.

**Kinderculture:** There is a growing body of literature which argues that the corporate world has created a world-wide kinderculture or culture of childhood. Video games, internet, instant messaging, music, CDs with earphones, food chains with special attractions, and movie videos create for children a consumer world which is like that of adults and yet which also provides children with escape from parental authority and from the strictures of the school. Authors have suggested that "in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, corporate produced children's culture has replaced schooling as the producer of the central curriculum of childhood" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2005, p.11). Note that our new national curriculum fails even to mention this '*central curriculum of childhood*'. Is this ignorance, ideological bias, or sheer timidity in the face of pressure from powerful groups?

This kinderculture not only surrounds children in their homes and out-of-school lives, but it is now being increasingly embedded in schools themselves. The most infamous example is of course, the work of Channel One in the United States. The channel is beamed into all classrooms of the schools which participate while the captive audience sits passively. They are presented with ten minutes of 'news' (critics point out that there is as much celebrity fluff as real news) and this is coupled with two minutes of commercials. These must be viewed and listened to silently and teachers may not comment or switch off the set.

Schools increasingly face an uphill battle in standing for any values not endorsed by the world of business. In the United Kingdom, the privatisation of school meals has brought about a situation in which the business world constructs what children like and it is very difficult for the school to foster even healthy *eating*, let alone the moral values which schools claim to stand for.

## THE DEAD HAND OF BUSINESS

The major influence of the business lobby on the Ministry of Education is evidenced by the presence of the term "entrepreneurial" in several places in the curriculum document. An entrepreneur is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "one who undertakes or controls a business or enterprise and bears the risk of profits and losses." Is such a person now to be the ideal, the model of what it is to be human? Is there no longer a place in our society for those who serve in shops, fix our cars and computers, build our highways, staff the offices, nurse the sick, teach the young? None of these are entrepreneurs but they serve society at least as well as those who make big money from bright ideas. Many submissions on the draft curriculum criticized the special status accorded to business interests. These included submissions from many teachers and from the Catholic bishops who wrote:

*The problem [of consumerism] will be compounded if schools lose their independence to teach the skills of critiquing business practices whenever those practices are not conducive to creating a just and compassionate society. The risk of losing this independence is the reason why we have strong reservations about special partnerships between business enterprises and schools. As it stands, the curriculum could create a perceived need for such partnerships (2006).*

Predictably, the views of many teachers and the bishops did not in any way deter the Ministry which for some years now has been a pawn of business. For more than a decade, business interests including the beer-producing firm Lion Nathan, the Business Enterprise Trust and Business New Zealand, have lobbied for control over what is taught in schools. It is clear that business groups believe that the schools belong to them. This curriculum is the culmination of an intensive and well resourced campaign. Its intent is to turn our schools into agents for the indoctrination of one particular set of values. Instead of producing informed and critical citizens who can relate with sympathy to each other, the schools are to aim for passive consumers on one hand and exploiters on the other.

Although both the *Science* and *Social Science* learning areas mention the need for "critical, informed and responsible citizens" and the technology area refers to "discerning consumers," none of this is followed up in the learning areas which, themselves, lack any real critical edge.

## LEARNING AREAS

In *Social Science*, the emphasis is on "understanding" a static social world rather than "critically examining" the ways in which politicians, advertisers and interest groups create that world. The Social Science curriculum is very sketchily developed

until level six and even beyond that is quite schematic. Here is surely the chance to discuss the massive social changes of the past twenty years, their impact on people (e.g. the growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' both globally and in New Zealand). On the contrary, at level eight, students are to be taught that "well functioning markets are efficient," apparently not recognising that this is a useless tautology: the real issue is whether markets *are* normally well functioning. Indeed, what is it for a market to be well-functioning? Does it matter, for example, if the environment is irreparably damaged, a community destroyed, or workers thrown on the scrap heap? (In connection with well functioning markets, the old adage comes to mind: The operation was successful: the patient died.)

In *Health and Physical Education*, at level six there is mention of organisations "that promote well-being and environmental care" but, of course, no mention of those organisations (e.g. the drug, tobacco, fast food and alcohol industries) which systematically undermine health and those (like farming and manufacturing) which promote environmental degradation and actively resist all attempts at regulation. There is also no recognition of the political ideologies which preserve the monopolies of these industries and their exploitation of people. Students are to be encouraged to "take individual and collective action to contribute to environments which can be enjoyed by all" but there is no recognition of the vested interests which will inevitably fight ruthlessly to forestall environments "which can be enjoyed by all".

In *Technology* there is much glorification of technology in society but no recognition that technology is not always beneficial: it has produced weapons of mass destruction, health destroying drugs, and environmental pollution. Even technologies which we all enjoy are far from benign: 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)*

A decent technology curriculum would have generalised this point to all technologies.

*Overall, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that the curriculum has*

been written to exclude anything which might be seen as critical of the world of business or negative about the social ideology which has dominated our politics since 1984. Schools have often served dominant interests: this curriculum is more blatant than most. (For further elaboration of these points, see Snook, 2006).

## A ROLE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHERS:

But of course, all is not lost: a curriculum is a lifeless document until used in teacher education programmes and by teachers in schools. Thus:

- There is room for teacher educators and teachers to take advantage of the few openings given: e.g. in *Technology*, "students are supposed to become increasingly able to engage with current and historical issues and to explore future scenarios". Historical issues should include gunpowder, nuclear weapons; current issues should include genetic engineering, stem cell research, and biofuels (which on one reading will cause massive starvation in developing countries on the back of guzzling motor cars in the developed world); future scenarios should focus on solving some of humanity's serious problems such as global warming, and the effect of "free trade" on poorer nations. When forced to take part in "entrepreneurial" programmes, teachers should work (as many now do) to subvert them by asking pertinent questions about what drug companies have done to health, what business practices have done for indigenous people, what effect the very well planned 'alcoholization' of society has done for human well being and social cohesion. (The late-night disasters in which so many young people figure as sorry statistics are due centrally to the greed of the alcohol industry and their supine supporters in parliament over many years.) Many curriculum areas can be subverted in this way by insightful teacher education and by enlightened teachers. I trust that every programme of teacher education has at least one course on "the politics of curriculum" so that students can see that a curriculum is the result of successful campaigns by interest groups and learn to recognise (and counteract) the bias in this one;
- Labour unions and other interested

parties, such as environmental groups, charities and social justice groups, should mount a campaign to have their materials included in all programmes: if schools are to be directly political, employees and the community have as much right to be heard as employers. Such groups should produce books and resource material to counterbalance business propaganda. School librarians should ensure an educative balance of materials available for students to study. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2001) is a must for every teacher;

- Parents should campaign to keep business programmes out of their schools and if unsuccessful should demand that their children be exempt under a conscience clause as for religious instruction since the same principle applies: the programmes pre-suppose a controversial values system which suits the beliefs of some but undermines the beliefs of others. These programmes are obviously biased towards the interests of employers and take no account of the interests of the work force, which most students will join. Most young people will not be entrepreneurs and the society would not be able to cope if they were. Most will join the work force as paid workers. They need to hear, not about "entrepreneurs," but about the centuries long struggles of workers for a share of the social cake; Chris Trotter's account of this battle in New Zealand should be read in all schools (Trotter, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

It is sad that a great chance has been missed to again put New Zealand in the forefront of the educative society as it was under Clarence Beeby and Peter Fraser and other officials and political leaders of both major parties until the betrayal by "Tomorrow's Schools". Our schools in this century could be unique in the world for producing people who are:

- Economically educated (rather than "financially literate"). This would include understanding the role of the World Bank and the IMF as well as the ideological role of the Treasury and business in promoting a particular model of economics;
- Environmentally friendly (rather than sustainably exploitative). This would demand a deep scientific and cultural analysis of the situation of the planet and our role in damaging it, perhaps beyond repair. Many current practices may not be sustainable;
- Media savvy (rather than complacently passive). Students would be encouraged to undertake an in depth analysis of the media, its role in fostering injustice and its immoral targeting of the "youth market;"
- Willing to engage with each other in creating a better society and a more just and peaceful world.

It could still happen, if enough people recognise this timid, business-oriented curriculum for what it is. There is still the possibility of actually educating the next generation. I hope that we can for, as I have said before "the minds and hearts of our children are at stake." (ref).

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