

**School Curriculum and Assessment Authority  
Conference on  
'Curriculum, Culture and Society'**

**Minority and Majority Cultures  
and Education**

**Michael Irwin  
POLICY ANALYST  
NEW ZEALAND BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE**

**LONDON  
9 FEBRUARY 1996**

# MINORITY AND MAJORITY CULTURES AND EDUCATION

## 1 Introduction

It is a considerable honour to speak to this important conference. I come from the furthest country represented here and also one of the smallest. Yet I suspect what I have to say will demonstrate that the issues considered are, in varying degrees, universal and independent of size or location. They are also very important, and I congratulate Dr Tate and the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority for taking the initiative in arranging this conference to consider them.

In this talk I will first make some observations about the nature and extent of cultural diversity. Much of our discussion in education about 'culture' centres on ethnicity and social class. I suggest that the issue of 'culture' is much more complex today. I don't provide a new definition of culture, but will try to describe, with reference to New Zealand examples, some of the tangles we can get into if we concentrate wholly on ethnicity and class and do not take critical account of wider influences. Secondly, I will narrow the focus and consider the particular issue of the educational attainment of Maori children; Maori being the dominant minority culture in New Zealand. Finally, I stress the importance of larger issues about the purposes of education and the important role our western intellectual inheritance has in raising and addressing enduring human questions common to all peoples, at all times and from all 'cultures'.

I find it helpful in approaching these issues to view education as, to use Michael Oakeshott's thought, a series of conversations between the generations (Oakeshott, 1967) - not just between contemporaries. These are conversations in which each of us may join if we desire, and if we make the effort to understand what is being discussed. This thought leads to the concept of a canon of, in Matthew Arnold's words, 'the best that has been known and thought'. This is not a fixed canon but a changing body to which each generation can make its contribution.

This perspective also diminishes the importance of any ethnic, class or other 'cultural' origins. Indeed, the basic contention of my address is that what should be regarded as fundamental in the 'cultural' curriculum, if that is not too pretentious a phrase, should not depend chiefly on whether it was invented or devised by one or many, by a majority or a minority, or whether it relates specifically to this or that group, although ethnic identity and numbers involved are relevant second-order considerations. I want to argue that the first-order considerations are those of truth and of intrinsic significance.

## 2 Some observations about cultures today with reference to education

The notion of culture - or of a culture - has become much more complicated in recent decades and is no longer associated exclusively or even predominantly with ethnicity or socio-economic class. Modern western society is fractured in unusual and often, in my view, unhealthy ways.

In times past, our affiliations were based primarily on family and extended beyond to tribe, village, parish, workplace, voluntary organisations, and ultimately to nation or perhaps empire. In these 'postmodern' times, society is also divided in terms of sexual

orientation, ethnicity, age and gender, and the cultural matrix becomes much more complex. There is a development of new 'cultural' blocs and interest groups, often international in scope (the recent United Nation's women's conference in Beijing is a case in point), that challenges the traditional view that many important matters are best worked out between individuals and groups at a grass roots level within society.

These and other competing claims for attention make it very difficult for educational authorities and schools to present a clear, strong view of the majority culture. And I very much agree with Dr Tate that the:

... best guarantee of strong minority cultures is the existence of a majority culture which is sure of itself, which signals that customs and traditions are things to be valued and which respects other cultures (Tate 1995).

### ***Postmodernism***

The international philosophical movement known as 'postmodernism' affects our thinking on all sorts of subjects including 'culture' in profound and often disturbing ways. Indeed, according to some, a common intellectual discourse on *any* subject is now problematical. The postmodern society is a multidimensional society (Barnett, 1994), lessening the possibility of a common 'culture' still further. As Ronald Barnett (1994) observed, "Given the abandonment of foundations of thought and life, all we have are constellations of ideas (Bernstein, 1991) or stories composed of different vocabularies (Rorty, 1989)."

It will be clear from my own remarks about the importance of making use of "the best" from any culture, and about "truth and intrinsic significance" that I reject the relativism to which much postmodernist thought logically leads. It seems to me that in its proper concern to identify blind prejudice and unexamined dogmatic belief as the enemies of truth, postmodernism has used the method of doubt to displace the notion of truth itself and in so doing rounds on itself. "Every truth is held to be no such thing, but rather an assertion of power. Indeed 'truth' itself becomes defined in this way. ... [The enemies of truth have] been allowed to define concern for truth - in such a way as logically to preclude its possibility!" (Kettle, 1995).

Once we deny the possibility of truth, and hence any need to search for it, all things become possible - as Nietzsche said of the death of God. The American theologian Michael Novak has warned of relativism as follows:

Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odorless, deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. This most perilous threat to the free society today is neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism. The people know this, while the intellectuals do not. If our intellectual betters knew this, they would be sounding the alarm (Novak, 1994).

### ***Human rights and 'social justice'***

The tendency for society to be fractured in new and unhelpful ways is, in my view, exacerbated by views about human rights and about what constitutes 'social justice' - views that are international and, in some cases, the subject of international

agreements. Today in New Zealand we have legislation and statutory agencies concerned with human rights, privacy, and race relations which seek to define what it is to be moral in these areas. All this spills over into the school curriculum which also, in various ways, describes and prescribes, as well as proscribes, modes of behaving and thinking. These legislative provisions were a response to the demands, including those of multiculturalism, for greater government involvement in establishing rules and symbols of social life (Epstein, 1995, p. 47).

The problem for the school curriculum is that legislative provisions require schools to "inculcate in children the 'right' beliefs at the most impressionable age, often without recognising that what is education for some looks like indoctrination to others" (Epstein, 1995, p. 314). Of course, parents can, and some do, inculcate the most appalling attitudes in their own children. But decentralising responsibilities and accepting the probability of some moral miseducation seems to me to be far better than to take the risks associated with allowing a few politicians, bureaucrats and educational agencies at the centre to determine the moral agenda for the system as a whole (Epstein, 1995, p. 314). A decentralised system at least provides the mechanism for correcting the smaller number of mistakes.

The more we close off possibilities about ways of ordering social life, the nearer we approach the phenomenon of the 'closed society' about which Karl Popper warned. President Vaclav Havel from the Czech Republic took up this theme in an address in New Zealand early last year. He said:

One of Popper's profound criticisms - which he supported by ample evidence - was a phenomenon he called holistic social engineering. He used this term to describe human attempts to change the world for the better completely and globally, on the basis of some preconceived ideology that purports to understand all the laws of historical development and to describe inclusively, comprehensively and holistically a state of affairs that would be the ultimate realisation of these laws (Havel, 1995).

Havel was not, I should emphasise, recommending the abandonment of attempts to improve the world we live in. He did recommend that we "should proceed with utmost caution and sensitivity, on a step-by-step basis, always paying attention to what each change actually brings about." He also warned against giving in to the "siren calls" of intellectuals who have succumbed to utopian or holistic engineering, and urged a humble approach to the world and its complexities.

Paul Johnson, an English historian and another recent visitor to New Zealand, says that his choice of political party or politician will be based on their view about the potential for government action:

If they take the view that politics can transform the nation or the world or our lives, I will be far less inclined to vote for them than if they take the view that politics can bring about a few carefully considered and sensibly administered changes, which will marginally improve some points of our existence.

I am inclined to agree, and I view with suspicion the siren calls of those who look to reforms in the education system as a means of reconstructing societies.

The thinking behind aspects of our human rights legislation also necessarily involves, in my view, a drift into the relativism to which I have already referred. It is a short movement from, for example, legislating for non-discrimination in terms of sexual orientation and race for employment and housing purposes (legislation which is, in my view, one-sided and wrong) to requiring non-discrimination between sexual practices, family structures, and cultures in state education. Indeed the word 'discrimination' has become a wholly negative word along with 'judgmental'. In fact, of course, much of education *should* be about advancing the ability to discriminate - not in terms of race and gender *per se* but between the good and the bad, the substantial and the trivial, the noble and the ugly, truth and propaganda, the eternal and the ephemeral, and so on. This can be unsettling for teachers because it leads to an independence of mind that might just conceivably conclude that the latest politically correct pronouncement by some political or educational authority is a load of humbug (Irwin, 1994a).

Moreover, the prior determination by central authorities of what is 'right' thinking hinders a dispassionate examination of issues that are often of great importance. In New Zealand, for example, it can be hazardous for students to question aspects of Maori history and culture or the ongoing importance and relevance to New Zealand of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. A student at the Christchurch polytechnic was banned from her nursing course because she was deemed to have failed a 'culture and society' component which involved attending a hui, or meeting conducted according to Maori protocol, at which she is alleged to have insulted the polytechnic's kaumatua, or Maori elder. According to a media article,<sup>1</sup> she commented that fear is the biggest mind-killer, and that it completely dominated the polytechnic course. Perceptively she pointed out that:

[Fear] stunts your growth and it doesn't allow progression of thought or theology or theories. That's what I kicked against - the fear.

The student in question has recently graduated with a bachelor of nursing degree - but from an Australian university.

The modern conception of 'social justice' also tends to affect society in some new and unhelpful ways which can have flow-on consequences for the educational curriculum. 'Social justice' refers these days to government interventions, particularly in the welfare area. Whether these are just, or constitute justice, is another matter entirely - we can't assume that because some government action comes under the rubric of 'social justice' it is in fact just. Like Kenneth Minogue (1995a), I prefer to think of justice as being justice - full stop. In fact there are obvious problems with the idea of 'social justice' as justice.

First, it is impersonal - anonymous taxpayers contribute to anonymous beneficiaries (often the same people) through the impersonal, bureaucratic tax/welfare system. Gratitude becomes redundant because we talk here of 'rights' free of corresponding duties, and certainly not of charity which is outlawed as demeaning and destructive of self esteem.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Dominion*, 30 December 1995.

Secondly, social welfare breaks the link between cause and effect (Minogue, 1995a). We can be idle and improvident and yet we will be protected to a substantial degree from the consequences of our misbehaviours. Thus, indiscriminate welfare undermines virtue. I recently asked two young people who graduated this year what jobs they were looking for. Both told me that it was far too early for serious effort on this front - the first thing to do on leaving full-time education was to get on the dole, relax and have a good time. Neither felt any moral obligation not to be a burden on the community though they were young, fit, well-educated (at public expense), and capable of obtaining jobs. Benefits may accrue to the idle as well as those in genuine need; thrift and prudence are not encouraged - indeed they are discouraged; and no difference can be countenanced between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

I suggest the modern social welfare system affects education and the curriculum in several ways. We have now in many countries what has been widely called a 'culture' of dependence - that is, reliance on monetary benefits or benefits in kind such as subsidised accommodation, the existence and level of which have little if any relationship to our own virtue or endeavours. It is a new 'culture' affecting many ethnic groups and is particularly pernicious. Such welfare arrangements sever the connection between action and result. Kenneth Minogue has commented as follows:

This [situation] is no doubt very relaxing. It is a bit like inherited wealth - or perhaps being a professor. The real point, however, is that the welfare state destroys meaning and significance. Those who (unlike most professors) lack any internal sense of direction, and usually also lack a religion, are in effect robbed of meaning, and thus of motivation. ... [T]he effect is too often to create a kind of miserable helplessness. ... It is a bit like manufacturing schizophrenia ... what philosophers might call a "meta-frustration". It is all the more pernicious because baffling. The victims cannot understand what ails them ... because in one sense they are safe, and secure, and nothing they do is going to make life any worse. And yet they seem to suffer from generalised anxiety (Minogue, 1995a).

The relevance of the 'culture of dependence' to my topic is that one of the problems teachers face is that many of their students see little point in hard work. When encouraged to work hard, to do their homework, to strive for excellence, or to put in additional effort to pass well instead of simply passing, the discouraging response is "What's the point?". This is usually more a statement about the lack of perceived purpose in life, the "meta-frustration", than a question. A related effect is the absorption of the view that the government, or someone, owes them a living or has the duty to attend to their needs in other ways.

Our social welfare system does little to advance among the young the realistic view that life is often painful and unpredictable, that what is worthwhile in life usually requires hard work, and that, even for the gifted, learning involves sweat, tears and disappointments. The system as developed in New Zealand breeds the view that life's hazards can be substantially averted by government action, and that when such action is absent, unreliable, or ineffective in ensuring success, or in meeting some personal crisis, it is someone else's 'fault'. It promotes 'rights' and has little to say about duties; it emphasises enjoyment and personal fulfilment but not hard work and obligations.

***Some effects of wider influences on New Zealand education***

Wider intellectual influences affect the way we think about education policy, even though many of them may seem bizarre and unreal to the average parent or teacher - those whom Thomas Sowell (1995) would call "the unanointed". But these are precisely the directions in which some of those seeking to determine education policy in New Zealand would have us travel.

New Zealand's recently introduced national curriculum framework document provides various principles to give direction to curriculum development in New Zealand schools. The document states that they are based on the premise that "the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning ... ." (Ministry of Education, 1993). Elsewhere I have called this premise "well-intentioned but romantic nonsense" (Irwin, 1994a). Of course education should be concerned about the individual child, but this is not what the document says. What the document fails to recognise - or perhaps wishes not to acknowledge - is that we all live in a complex society of relationships, rights, institutions, duties and obligations, with extensive cultures and a long history. It is hard to see how we can prepare young people to take their place in such a society if the central premise of their education is that each and every one of them is at the centre of all teaching and education. Such a premise is, of course, a negation of Michael Oakeshott's view about education being a series of conversations between the generations to which the young are being introduced. It also leads, ultimately, to the negation of an effective pedagogy based on what is common among children and, as Brian Simon (1981) pointed out, "to a total differentiation of the learning process for each individual child which is not only undesirable in principle, it is impossible in practice." Similarly, it is also, of course, incompatible with the notion of a *national* curriculum.

The traditional subjects are being replaced, at least to some extent, by 'essential learning areas' and 'essential skills' though which skills can be developed in what learning areas and contexts is rarely made sufficiently clear for the classroom teacher. Our qualifications authority is busy seeking to remove the academic/vocational divide, perceived to be anti-egalitarian, through the imposition of an enormously ambitious (I would also say 'naive') qualifications framework. This includes all education - academic, vocational, technical - from age 15 upwards. Her Majesty's present Chief Inspector of Schools described in a recent speech in New Zealand the situation in England in a way that fits the New Zealand situation exactly:

Terrified by the prospect of a 'sheep and goats' division, we seek 'to bridge the academic/vocational divide' and render homogeneous that which should be distinct. In so doing, we run the risk of ensuring that the vocational is still-born and the academic emasculated (Woodhead, 1995).

Yet this individual, child-centred, approach is consistent with the wider, international changes in ways of thinking to which I have referred, particularly the relativist assumptions of postmodernism. If the individual student is really the ultimate arbiter of what is important, then this has massive implications, at least some of which were no doubt unintended by the authors of the curriculum framework. At best a national curriculum can become a series of ill-defined guidelines leaving individual students with many options - indeed some of our recent curriculum statements are exactly like that. Traditional subject boundaries and disciplines give way to a seamless or, more accurately, shapeless web of knowledge and an infinite ability to weave our way

wherever our fancy takes us. The implications for teacher education are equally immense. Teachers have to become trained facilitators and not passers-on of "the best that has been known and thought".

"The New Zealand Curriculum Framework" (Ministry of Education, 1993) also requires school curriculum to "be sufficiently flexible to respond to each student's learning needs" and "will recognise, respect, and respond to the educational needs, experiences, interests, and values of all students. ... All programmes will be gender-inclusive, non-racist, and non-discriminatory, to help ensure that learning opportunities are not restricted. It will ensure that the experiences, cultural traditions, histories, and languages of all New Zealanders are recognised and valued." Of particular significance is that assessment is to "recognise the differences in gender, culture, background, and experience that students bring to their learning." Moreover, "every effort will be made to ensure that assessment procedures are fair to all students ... ."

The child-centred - not content-centred - orientation is clear in all this. But it does beg some serious questions. For example, the problem with a curriculum focused on needs, whether those of the society, the economy or the individual students, is that it is based on changing subjective perceptions. It acknowledges few, if any, external benchmarks against which education can be judged (Irwin, 1994b, p. 7). Are we to regard as worthy the values of all children, even of those who cheat, bully or steal - values which may, unfortunately, reflect those of the homes in question? Are we to value *all* cultures and histories, even despicable aspects and events, and, if so, are some cultures and histories allowed to be more equal than others? Are assessment procedures to be tailored, individually if necessary, to those to be assessed or to the material to be tested? These are not idle, tendentious questions. If we examine the recently published draft social studies curriculum statement for New Zealand we find some of the logical results to which this relativist approach leads. A submission on the draft curriculum with which I was involved (Education Forum 1995) expressed strong concern with, *inter alia*:

- its exaggerated emphasis on the here-and-now which undermines the proven instructional value of the lessons of history and literature;
- its implication that self-directed activity by unprepared students, without the clear guidance of well-informed teachers, is the most effective way in which knowledge can be acquired;
- its reluctance to confront the unattractive features of traditional Polynesian culture, the grave limitations of pre-industrial cultures everywhere, and the positive (not just negative) aspects of European settlement;
- its suggestion that only Maori perspectives on Maori culture are valid; and
- its requirement that teachers value traditional Maori family relationships and forms of land ownership, but not the typical nuclear family of those of British stock and modern forms of property ownership that have been so germane to economic and social progress.

Both the draft social studies curriculum and the now final English curriculum refer to the need for the school curricula in these subjects to be 'gender-inclusive'. What this means exactly is not always clear. However, it has been pointed out that if the aim is to give the same amount of attention to recorded female and male activities in social studies programmes, massive omissions and purges of major areas of human experience would be required. Whether or not this state of affairs should now be viewed as 'just', the fact is that the overwhelming bulk of activity recorded in many fields of human endeavour has been carried out by males (Education Forum 1995). Similarly, as Professor Karl Stead has observed, "any attempt to balance the choice of texts as between male and female authors [in the English curriculum] would be to misrepresent literary history since women writers were relatively few prior to the twentieth century. That it is fashionable to deplore this fact does nothing to alter it, nor to supply a shortfall of good pre-twentieth century texts by women" (Education Forum, 1994).

### ***Some conclusions about modern influences***

We have then a strange mixture of, on the one hand, moral relativism which requires the suspension of judgment and, on the other hand, moral passion which demands acceptance of particular judgments and denounces those who question them as dishonest or worse, thus generating the fear to which I have referred. It is what Michael Polanyi called 'moral inversion' (Polanyi, 1958, pp. 232ff) and comes about when moral passion is uprooted from any authoritative external ground and is hence less open to critical philosophical analysis (Torrance, 1975). "The morally inverted person", Polanyi says, "has not merely performed a philosophic substitution of moral aims by material purposes, but is acting with the whole force of his homeless moral passions within a purely materialistic framework of purposes." It carries with it a strong sense of righteousness and moral superiority, evident in passionate judgments against social evils, including racism and sexism, and is particularly prevalent among those who work in the education sector.

This moral passion requires a political power base if it is to exert force and achieve its ends. In the education area it is the lever of the national curriculum that, if captured, can mostly easily exert that force, which is why it is important that this lever is handled with great wisdom. I hope it will be apparent enough that I am not arguing that any curriculum should endorse sexism or racism. On the contrary, concern for justice and for the removal or diminution of sexual or racial discrimination are just and proper causes. My concern is that when such causes become detached from external reference points such as truth and intrinsic worth (the religious among us would say transcendent moral obligation), they can lead to distortions of the truth, hypocrisy and indoctrination. We do well to remember Bertrand Russell's, remark that:

[a wise system of education] would aim at making [children] think, not at making them think what their teachers think ... . If we respected the rights of children, we should educate them so as to give them the knowledge and the mental habits required for forming independent opinions; but education as a political institution endeavours to form habits and to circumscribe knowledge in such a way as to make one set of opinions inevitable (Egner and Denonn, 1961).

Dorothy Sayers put it even more succinctly in what would in New Zealand now be politically incorrect language:

For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain (Sayers, 1948, p. 263).

Thus in various and contradictory ways, modern societies are perhaps more fractured than ever before. In our concern for rights we seek to impose by legislation a particular view of virtuous behaviour, while in our social welfare arrangements we weaken the possibility of virtue. And in our postmodern thinking we preclude the possibility of a common view about what might constitute virtue anyway!

The traditional approach to 'culture' in education, concentrating on ethnicity and class, has its place but, combined with uncritical acceptance of these wider influences, can lead us badly astray.

### **3 Ethnicity**

It will be clear that I see the minority/majority culture issue as being more complex than that of ethnicity or socio-economic status. However, I will now narrow my focus to ethnicity, in particular Maori education, as it plays a prominent part in discussion of New Zealand's sociology of education. It raises the key questions about what can be done to improve the educational performance of groups with relatively poor educational attainment.

Maori education presents a picture of particularly stubborn social differences in our educational system. Maori are also over-represented in Ministry of Justice statistics, have a significantly higher incidence of health problems, shorter average life spans, and a higher degree of welfare dependency. In terms of education, there has, over recent years, been a significant improvement in the retention of Maori children in the senior secondary school and in participation in preschool and tertiary education. However, a significant gap between Maori levels of achievement and those of non-Maori remains and does not appear to be closing very much if at all.

The gap between Maori and non-Maori in national examinations is considerable and a cause for serious concern - though I should note that Maori females generally do better than Maori males. In the School Certificate for 1993, for example, 41 percent of grades received by Maori females were 'C's or better compared with 65 percent for all females; and the figures for Maori males and all males were 36 percent and 59 percent respectively. The proportion of Maori students leaving school without any formal qualifications has fallen significantly in recent years - 53 percent in 1986 to 33 percent in 1993 - but remains three times higher than the percentage for non-Maori. The differences are important for reasons of social cohesion and more generally for social and economic development. Maori represent some 13 percent of the total population (12.9 percent in the 1991 census), but in 1993 Maori children were some 22 percent of all primary students and 17 percent of all secondary students.

Before discussing the possible reasons for low Maori educational attainment, I should note some important aspects in the relations between Maori and non-Maori. Perhaps the first thing to say is that the non-Maori, usually referred to as 'Pakeha', are not a

homogeneous group. They are predominantly of British stock, but there has been significant immigration of other Europeans, Chinese, Indian and, more recently, of Polynesians and East Asians. New Zealand has accepted refugees from Indo-China and the Middle East. When non-Maori come together for cultural purposes they don't do so as 'Pakeha' but as New Zealanders of, for example, Dutch, Welsh, Gujerati, Scottish, Tongan, Cambodian, Iraqi birth or descent. It is also the case that Maori tend to emphasise their 'iwi' (tribal), not ethnic, origins.

The issue of Maori education is complicated in some respects by the official biculturalism in New Zealand. Maori is an official language and the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840 between the British Crown and Maori tribal chiefs is now recognised in legislation. Educational bureaucracies have positions specifically set aside ('tagged') for Maori to address Maori issues, and in the interests of ensuring equal employment opportunity. Educational institutions claim to affirm the principles of the Treaty, though what those principles are and how they are derived from a very short treaty signed over 150 years ago is rarely, if ever, explicated. Making and assessing compensation claims against the Crown for wrongful confiscation of land and breaches of the Treaty has become a significant activity within government and among Maori people. It is concerned with the redistribution of wealth, rather than its creation. Whether it will bring about an improved environment for social and economic progress will depend on the wisdom of the settlements, how enduring they prove to be, and how well the funds or other assets handed over in compensation are used.

Much of all this is understandable and praiseworthy. But it also invites the worst of internationally modish ideas. I have already referred to the problem at Christchurch polytechnic. It takes courage to question Maori history and culture. The abusive term 'racist', like 'sexist', is taken seriously as if it constitutes an argument in itself. Statements may, of course, be racist or sexist and in such cases the accusation needs to be taken seriously. But it is difficult to discuss the actual state of affairs or historical events with objectivity. In my experience, however, the difficulty lies much more with 'liberal' non-Maori people than with Maori.

Another difficulty arises with the forms of promotion or appointment on the grounds of ethnicity and sex, not of ability. The State Sector Act 1988 requires the appointment of the most suitable person for the job but there is a tension here with the proper emphasis on equal employment opportunity. In practice, minimum competence may be sought and not the most able. Of course, what constitutes ability for a particular job may be debatable. When the institutions affected are concerned with education, then the quality of our education system, and through it the wider society, can only suffer. Minogue (1995b) has pointed out that calls to address 'under-representation' are not aimed at areas where incompetence would lead rapidly to obvious, immediate and very nasty consequences. He points out that airline pilots and brain surgeons from minority cultures or who are women achieve their positions because of merit and not as a result of political campaigns. Unfortunately the government bureaucracy and education are areas where incompetence reaps its harvest over the long term and the perpetrators are not often identified.

It seems to me that Maori education is, or should be, a major area for educational debate and for the application of the talents of some of our most able policy researchers and analysts. Restricting the confines of the debate and limiting the

analysis of the problems largely to Maori seem to me to make the achievement of any realistic assessment and policy prescriptions that much more unlikely. It appears to be based on the view that only people of a particular ethnicity can understand the needs of that group and identify with its members. This, of course, is contrary to much in history, which seeks to understand the thoughts and actions of people of other times and places, and the humanities which involves critical appreciation of literary and artistic works undertaken by people in vastly different circumstances to our own. Moreover it potentially raises all the problems of a particularistic multiculturalism which is socially divisive in denying the possibility of a common civic culture (while allowing any number of private ethnic or religious 'cultures') and anti-educational in opposing the universalising programme of education (Ravitch 1990). Here again, the issues are, at bottom, those of truth and the intrinsic worth of ideas and understandings: these may be eroded by political and particularistic agenda.

Moreover, conferring special privileges to address perceived old grievances only creates new wrongs and new grievances which will themselves need eventually to be addressed. It is another case of today's solution becoming tomorrow's problem - or, perhaps, today's abuse being yesterday's reform. Compensation may well be justified where there has been clear contractual failure, but it should not be allowed to encourage the unhelpful idea that the lack of material resources is the basic cause of many Maori problems, including educational problems, and that the provision of additional resources must, therefore, be their solution.

Another major thrust of the government's bicultural policy is to facilitate and encourage the recovery of the Maori language and culture. The thrust is, understandably, directed at the young through Maori language nursery schools (Te Kohanga Reo), schools (Kura Kaupapa Maori) and units; offering Maori as a language option in English-medium schools; and the preparation of curricular resources in Maori. The jury is still out on the long-term effects of this on the language. It will be a hard, uphill struggle given the erosion of the language over many years, which has resulted in a shortage of fluent Maori speakers including teachers, and the international importance of English as a medium of communication. What is also not clear to me is whether the attention given to the Maori language at school weakens efforts to improve Maori educational performance in other important areas - especially written and spoken English. It is an uncomfortable and sensitive question and one on which other countries' experience with minority languages might throw some light.

This leads me to some brief comments on possible reasons for the lower educational achievement of Maori children. I claim no expertise here and can only draw on what others have said. Like Nash (1993), I don't think it particularly helpful simply to assume that, because differences in educational attainment can be identified between groups, there is necessarily lack of equal opportunity or some other inequality.

Inequality of resources does not seem to me to be a valid reason for different educational outcomes. Maori are well distributed geographically and most attend state schools with Pakeha. State schools are all funded on a similar basis except that additional funding is available for schools in lower socio-economic areas and for Maori language education. Because many Maori live in lower socio-economic areas they tend to be funded at a higher rate than the average. Also the international literature does not suggest that, within the ranges normally encountered, differences in resources are correlated with different educational outcomes.

It might, of course, be argued that Maori have a different 'learning style' and need more resources to support it. The issue of possible learning style differences has been raised by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 21) but I am not aware of any convincing research in the area. If it has any validity, it might also apply to children from different socio-economic groups - not just different ethnic groups. Nash (1993) reports that studies have failed to suggest that differences in teaching methodology between Maori and non-Maori schools and teachers generate significant differences in attainment.

Teacher attitudes have been also raised as a possible reason for differences in educational outcomes. In any large work force there are bound to be some with unhelpful racial attitudes. But I strongly suspect that they are a small minority in the New Zealand teacher force, and to explain the significant differences in educational outcomes in terms of teacher attitudes would seem quite untenable. The author of a report on a study of the achievement of Maori teachers with Maori children pointed out that "Maori and Pacific Island children in [the] study also did quite well with European teachers" (Kerin, 1986 p. 119, cited by Nash, 1993, p. 198).

It is undoubtedly the case that children from middle class backgrounds start school better prepared than those from the 'working' class and tend to stay ahead. This clearly reflects different family backgrounds and resources. It is unlikely that any pedagogy could be devised that somehow allows the not-prepared to catch up without deliberately (and unjustifiably) holding back those who are prepared (Nash 1993).

In fact, according to Nash (1993, p. 199) "the bulk of available research" indicates that Maori children underachieved compared with non-Maori because of differences in family resources, especially literary resources. In this most lower socio-economic status (SES) non-Maori will be in the same position as lower SES Maori - both being members of what might be called an 'Anglo-Maori working class'. Studies indicate a high degree of correlation between class origin and class destination (Lauder *et al.* 1985). One review of the research (Harker, 1979, pp. 48 - 49) did, however, indicate that after environmental factors had been controlled, some variation in attainment was still left to ethnicity.

The importance of family resources to educational attainment means that more than school structures and practices will need to change if the attainment gap between Maori and non-Maori is to be significantly reduced (see Nash, 1993, p. 199). One way forward is to bring schools and their communities closer together. But how far schools can change their practices is circumscribed by curriculum and assessment requirements. All schools reflect local or national cultures, and will be different whether in New Zealand or the New Hebrides. But in all modern, industrialised societies, schools teach much the same basic curriculum and their structure and practices are also determined by what is to be taught. To that extent there will be no significant difference between schools in different jurisdictions. This is not to say that we can't improve our pedagogy by learning from each other: we obviously can as Stevenson and Stigler (1992) have clearly demonstrated. It is to say that it is helpful for schools to change to meet local 'cultural' concerns only in so far as the requirements of the curriculum and related processes allow.

Some changes in New Zealand may well be helpful. We have gone some way (not as far as in the United Kingdom) to local management of schools with parent elected governors. The growth of Maori language nursery schools and schools may also have the desirable effect of involving Maori parents in the schooling of their children and overcoming barriers between the home culture and the culture necessitated by the curriculum. Learning about Maori culture has long been part of New Zealand school education; it not only enriches the curriculum for all children but may help to overcome antipathy to learning among alienated Maori children. All this may lead to raised parental expectations and more effective parental support at home. However, if, as it seems, reducing the educational attainment gap involves achieving a more even representation of Maori and non-Maori in socio-economic groups, it will be a long process. This calls for realism and patience as well as determination: attempts to hasten history too often backfire.

But I would not like to end this section of my paper on a pessimistic note. The increases in Maori retention and participation rates are definitely encouraging. I would also note that Maori students with school leaving qualifications are more likely than non-Maori with the same qualifications to enter tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 5); this is particularly encouraging.

One area outside education policy which will affect educational decisions of students and families is that of employment. We have enjoyed in recent years quite a dramatic reduction in unemployment in New Zealand as successive governments have made the necessary but difficult decisions - in particular to make the labour market more flexible. The more ready availability of jobs for relatively unskilled school leavers may initially cause participation of Maori and others in tertiary education to be lower than otherwise, but over the longer term it must be beneficial in opening up wider horizons and opportunities beyond school. For many less academically-inclined school leavers, a job is the best form of training, and getting a foothold on the first rung of the job ladder is vital. It is essential that governments do not present high unemployment rates as an inevitable part of modern, technological life - it isn't. Without the ready availability of jobs much of what we do within education is undermined.

## **Conclusions**

I have suggested that the culture is fragmenting in a number of unusual and often unhelpful ways. Concern for human dignity and 'social justice' has led to much government activity in human rights legislation and social welfare arrangements. A combination of European guilt about the wrongs of the distant past and the 'rediscovery' of Treaty obligations has led to official biculturalism and the promotion of Maori culture and language. I have also suggested that excellent intentions and moral passion can become corrupted by lack of concern for truth and intrinsic value.

In terms of Maori education I have noted the substantial attainment gap between Maori and non-Maori and suggested that, while some recent trends are encouraging, any significant reduction in the gap will be a long drawn-out affair and that clear thinking and patience as well as ongoing determination are required.

In our proper concern to be sensitive to 'cultural' differences, we can all too easily be led astray by an uncritical acceptance of modern modes of thought and lose focus on the larger issues about the purposes of education and deeper, and ultimately more

important, concerns. A particular casualty along the way has been the diminution of the importance we should place on our western intellectual inheritance. For some in New Zealand, embracing Maori culture seems to mean rejecting western culture, or even denying that European New Zealanders have a culture. For others, perhaps, it is because western culture is still predominantly that of 'dead, white males'.

At a deeper level, this western tradition may be rejected because it wrestled with the now unfashionable notions of truth and intrinsic value. It is not that truth was always seen as readily attainable or that our knowledge was always regarded as certain rather than provisional. Rather, western thinking held that there was a truth to work towards and vital questions for all humanity to address. Dame Leonie Kramer said that the relevance of the great minds of our western tradition:

... is their persistent engagement with fundamental questions. What is the nature of the universe? How has man over the centuries tried to explain its origins, purpose and design? What are our human capabilities, weaknesses and strengths? How do human beings organise themselves? How do they distinguish good from evil, beauty from ugliness, right from wrong? It is not only in philosophy and history that these questions are raised. It's in literature, fiction and drama and, though wordlessly, in painting and in music (Kramer, 1988).

The Maori in New Zealand have traditionally had a strong sense of their *whakapapa*, their genealogy. For many New Zealanders a more relevant concept is that of our intellectual whakapapa, our 'ancestors of the mind'. A New Zealander, Jim Traue, describes his 'ancestors of the mind' (Traue, 1990) as those who, although unrelated to him by blood, have shaped his beliefs, values, ideas - the things he holds dear and which help identify him as a person. He cites the great philosophers of Greece, the jurists and administrators of Rome, the canonical authors of the Bible and others whose writings permeate our society and affect our lives in countless ways. Our ancestors of the mind, he points out, come from all languages and civilisations that have left written records - it is a democratic culture because open to all.

I find this notion a powerful and helpful one. It rises above considerations of time, place and ethnicity. Knowing our 'intellectual whakapapa' helps us to cope with change, and gives us some reference points from which to take our bearings. It also addresses what Professor Sworder of La Trobe university calls the isolation and loneliness of many of today's young. They have, he says, "no sense at all of where it is that they come from or what was here before". But he goes on to point out that when they come to study the past with any love or care, that isolation begins to disappear.

What happens over and over again is the shock of recognition. You study a work from 2000 years ago and suddenly you see that there in that book, in that picture, is the realisation of something that you have felt all your life and have never heard or seen expressed. You discover that you can find out as much or more about yourself from the far distant past as you can from the things that surround you now (Sworder, 1994).

And Emeritus Professor Karl Stead of Auckland University points to the role of great literature, from a wide range of sources, in opening up the mind:

The crown of English studies [in the New Zealand English curriculum] ought to be the encounter with literature, which offers the best, richest and most exciting examples of language use, the folk stories of our inherited European culture as well as the tales of our own settler and post-colonial experience - a fund of wisdom, a storehouse of fact, and a range of experience beyond the powers of any one person to live in many lifetimes. The very best of poetry or fiction exposes readers, as often as they care to open a book, to the influence of minds and sensibilities finer, more developed, richer, than they are likely to meet more than once or twice, if ever, in real life (Education Forum, 1994).

Limiting the access of our young to these riches in the interests of other agenda seems to me to be a tragedy of enormous proportions. Children from middle class homes may not be so badly affected because their homes' resources and family traditions will to some extent make up for what is omitted from the classroom. The most seriously short-changed will be those from homes where literary and other resources are absent.

W.B. Yeats wrote a poem called "The fascination of what's difficult". Perhaps we need to bear that thought in mind when constructing curricula as a useful antidote to much of today's preoccupations with student self-esteem and what is deemed to be immediately relevant. Students like 'meat' in their educational diet. And perhaps it will be the tedium of present curricula, and the good sense of the great majority of teachers, parents and, perhaps above all, students, that eventually will bring back us back to Matthew Arnold's prescription.

There is, of course, a place, a vital place, in the school curriculum for material relevant to local concerns. The choice of history or geography, for example, should include national history and local geography. There will be a place for local art and literature as Professor Stead clearly indicated.

What I do urge is that in selecting material for the 'cultural curriculum' priority is given to considerations of truth and intrinsic significance. The 'conversations' that have been taking place between the generations for many centuries now have resulted in an enormous body of intellectual riches which we jettison at our, and our children's, peril. It is a heritage open to all cultures, majority and minority - not a colonial imposition - and one to which each generation and all 'cultural' groups can contribute.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Agnes-Mary Brooke, John Jensen, Roger Kerr, Geoffrey Partington, David Thomson and Ken Rae in the preparation of this address. However responsibility for the views expressed remains my own.

## REFERENCES

Barnett, R. (1994), *The Limits of Competence - Knowledge, Higher Education and Society*, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham, England.

Bernstein, R.J. (1991), *The New Constellation*, Polity, Oxford.

Education Forum (1994), *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*, a submission on the draft English curriculum statement prepared with the assistance of C.K. Stead, Education Forum, April, New Zealand.

Education Forum (1995), *Social Studies in New Zealand*, a submission on the draft social studies curriculum statement prepared with the assistance of Geoffrey Partington, Education Forum, August, New Zealand.

Egner, R.F. and Denonn, L.E. (eds.) (1961), *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, George Allen and Unwin, London.

Epstein, R.A. (1995), *Simple Rules for a Complex World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Harker, R. (1979), *Research on the Education of Maori Children*, Paper presented to the New Zealand Association for Educational Research conference, 7-10 December.

Havel, V. (1995), Speech on accepting the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, in the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 31 March 1995.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994a), *Cucumbers, Stale Bread and Educational Frameworks*. Paper delivered to the New Zealand Secondary Principals Association Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, 29 March.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994b), *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications: an Evaluation of Current Reforms*, Education Forum, May.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994c), *The Humanities in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Paper delivered at the New Zealand Social Studies and Curriculum Change Conference, Hamilton, New Zealand, 11 May.

Harker, R. (1979), *Research on the Education of Maori Children*, Paper presented to the NZARE conference, New Zealand, 7 - 10 December.

Johnson, P. (1995), 'Left and Right in Politics Today' in *Paul Johnson in New Zealand*, New Zealand Business Roundtable, Wellington, New Zealand .

- Kettle, D. (1995), 'Bearings on the Sea of Faith', *Leading Light*, Winter.
- Kramer, L. (1988), 'Schools and the Transmission of Culture', *News Weekly*, July 6.
- Lauder, H.C., Hughes, D.C., and Taberner, S.J. (1985), 'Education, Class and Inequality in New Zealand: a preliminary report', *Delta 36*, New Zealand.
- Minogue, K. (1995a), *The Real Meaning of Social Justice*, unpublished paper, 16 November.
- Minogue, K. (1995b), 'Notes on Australian Intellectual Decadence', *Adelaide Review*, December.
- Ministry of Education, 1995, *Nga Haeata Matauranga, Annual Report on Maori Education 1994/95 and Strategic Direction for 1995/96*, Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Nash, R. (1993), *Succeeding Generations - Family Resources and Access to Education in New Zealand*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Novak, M. (1994), Speech upon receiving the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, London, May 5.
- Oakeshott, M. (1967), 'Learning and Teaching' in Fuller, T. (ed.) (1989), *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, Yale University Press, United States.
- Openshaw, R. Lee, G., and Lee, H. (1993), *Challenging the Myths - Rethinking New Zealand's Educational History*, The Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Polanyi, M. (1958), *Personal Knowledge*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Ravitch, D. (1990), 'Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures', *The Key Reporter*, Volume 56 Number 1, Autumn.
- Rorty, R., (1989), *Contingency, Irony and Subsidiarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sayers, D. (1948), 'The Lost Tools of Learning' in Burleigh, A.H. (ed.) (1993), *Education in a Free Society*, Liberty Press, Indianapolis.
- Simon, B. (1981), 'Why no Pedagogy in England?', in Simon, B. and Taylor, W. (eds), *Education in the Eighties: The Central Issues*, Batsford Academic and Educational, pp. 124 - 45, London.
- Sowell, T. (1995), *The Vision of the Anointed*, Basic Books, New York.
- Stevenson, H.W., and Stigler, J.W. (1992), *The Learning Gap: Why our schools are failing and what we can learn from Japanese and Chinese education*, New York: Summit Books.
- Sworder, R. (1994), 'The Value of Traditional Disciplines', *Cutting Edge*, April/May.

Tate, N. (1995), Speech to the Shropshire Secondary Headteachers Annual Conference, 13 July.

Torrance, T.F. (1975), *Theology in Reconciliation*, Chapman, London.

Traue, J. (1990), *Ancestors of the Mind - a Pakeha Whakapapa*, Gondwanaland Press, Wellington, New Zealand.

Woodhead, C. (1995), *Do we know what we want from our schools?* Paper presented at New Zealand Business Roundtable function, Wellington, 6 December.