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**Curricular Confusion: The Case for Revisiting
the New Zealand Curriculum Framework**

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CURRICULAR CONFUSION

My subject is the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) (hereinafter *Framework*). *Framework* claims considerable self-importance. In the first sentence of her Foreword to it, the then Secretary for Education describes it as an "important document", and she commends it for providing:

... the foundation for learning programmes in New Zealand schools for the 1990s and beyond.

I propose to treat it with the importance it claims for itself.

Part of its claimed importance lies in its assumed durability - which I interpret to mean that it will be so imbued with self-evident good sense that it will set a widely accepted ethos and overall direction for school activities for many years to come, riding out short-term fluctuations in educational fashion. And this is as it should be. We don't, after all, expect a new curriculum framework every year or two. However, to be durable a framework must be based on a sound philosophy of education including a wise purpose for schooling, and sufficient flexibility to enable the various components to be set within it without distortion. This may well prove to be a tall order in these culturally plural and post-modern times, but at least it is a goal we should aim at.

I would also note that it is now over five years since the draft *National Curriculum of New Zealand - a Discussion Document* was published (Ministry of Education, 1991). The final document was published two years later and most of the main curriculum statements fleshing out the framework have now been finalised (English, maths, science, physics, chemistry, biology, technology) or have been published as discussion documents (social studies). Draft statements have yet to be published in only two of the seven essential learning areas identified in the Curriculum Framework - 'Arts' and 'Health and Physical Well-being'.

While much implementation work remains to be undertaken, even where statements have been finalised, it is a good time to review where we have got to and to ask some questions. For example, how well have the framework and the individual curricula stood up to criticism? If we were back five years, in 1991, and had the benefit of hindsight, what would we have done differently?

In 1994 the then minister of education claimed that:

Over the last year, there has been almost universal support - perhaps a unique phenomenon in education - for the Government's curriculum reforms (Smith, 1994, p.1)

I suspect the "almost universal support" would be difficult to sustain. The science, English and social studies curricula generated considerable debate through the media and elsewhere. The Education Forum has been a source of sustained analysis and comment on *Framework* and the various subject curricula, and some of its

comments have been very critical. But Dr Smith was, I think, correct to the extent that there has not been much criticism overall.

We should be careful not to assume, however, that this relative lack of comment on the curricula reforms is indicative of soundness. There are various reasons why we might not have expected a lot of critical reaction. First, much attention has been directed elsewhere - school salary bulk funding, tertiary funding and, in more recent times, the new qualifications framework. Secondly, the new curricula do not impact on teachers and teaching as directly as the qualifications framework will on the senior secondary school. Some principals have pointed out to me that they are not overly concerned with deficiencies in various curricula because they have teachers who will still deliver a good curriculum and disregard whatever they dislike in the new ones. I can understand their stance, but from the viewpoint of the schools sector as a whole we should take criticism seriously. Confident, able teachers can make good judgments about what to ignore and can use their own expertise, experience and resources, while less able and inexperienced teachers will rely heavily on the curriculum documents and treat them as blueprints.

A third reason for the lack of criticism is the absence of any professional teacher body able to critique the curricular - and other - school reforms objectively and professionally. I have no doubt that the teacher associations in the various subject areas do a good job within their available resources. The teacher unions are, at present, the only teacher organisations with the necessary funds but their prime concern is, understandably, the welfare of their members. The unions have referred to the additional administrative burdens consequent on the reforms, and this concern is quite justified.

Fourth, these 'academic' issues are a lot harder to analyse than the more concrete administrative and financial reforms within education. Finally, our education community is very small, - there is only a handful of experts in any particular curriculum area - and there isn't the range of view and debate one would expect in a larger educational jurisdiction. Moreover, these are areas in which agencies outside the educational bureaucracy (e.g. the Treasury) have little, if any, expertise and, by and large, do not participate to any significant degree in discussion about them. There is, therefore, little contestability of advice to government.

But, whatever the reasons, the result has, in my view, been a lot of straining at the 'gnats' of issues like salary bulk funding and much swallowing of curricular 'camels'.

So how do we go about reviewing those reforms? First, I want to consider what we might expect of a curriculum 'framework' and to comment briefly on the ministry's policy development processes. Secondly, I will consider what we find in the framework we have been given. In doing so I will draw on some of the curriculum statements to see how *Framework* has been interpreted and applied in the various essential learning areas. Finally, I will outline a different approach which was developed in a report written for the Education Forum in 1994 (Irwin, 1994c).

WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT TO FIND IN A CURRICULUM 'FRAMEWORK'?

An immediate problem for anyone wanting to ask first order questions like 'Why do we need a framework and what should we expect to find in it?' is that the ministry doesn't appear to consider such issues, or, if it does, it doesn't publish its findings. In its curricular activities, the first published document is usually the first draft of whatever has to be produced. It is as if these first order issues were of no consequence or, perhaps, as if the answers are obvious and unproblematic to any reasonable, right-thinking educationalist. So we have to infer answers to questions about *Framework* such as:

- What are the purposes of schooling that should underlie *Framework*, and how should these purposes influence curricular content?
- Should *Framework* cover all the years of schooling or only, say, those up to the senior secondary school?
- If *Framework* is to be extended to the senior secondary school how should it be related to school summative assessments?¹
- Should *Framework* provide only a core, leaving schools to expand beyond the core? If a core is to be adopted, how much of the total school curriculum should it cover at the various stages of schooling, and of what should it consist?
- Should *Framework* provide for curricular differentiation or should it assume that all pupils will progress along the same track, albeit at different rates and to different end points?
- Should *Framework* be structured in terms of ages, stages or levels, and how many and which ones?
- How should content be presented? In subjects, learning areas or cross-curricular approaches, and which ones? Should there be only one structure for all subjects, or should content determine the best structure for each subject?
- How is the balance to be drawn between providing firm curricular support for weak teachers and giving freedom to able teachers to extend and innovate?²
- How should skills be handled and what is their relationship to curricular content?
- What, if any, assumptions about pedagogy should be adopted and why?

¹ The resolution of this issue is made more difficult by the separation of responsibility for the New Zealand Curriculum Framework from that for the National Qualifications Framework.

² This is an important question if it is to be assumed (as surely it should be) that teachers are professionals who can think seriously about their practices and those of other teachers.

These are some of the many vital questions that should, surely, be asked by those faced with the task of constructing a curriculum framework. While in the case of *Framework* some of the answers are apparent from the text, the reasons for the answers, including why some answers were chosen and not others, are nowhere explicit.

It would be correctly pointed out that the curriculum framework initiative of 1991-93 was itself a development of earlier endeavours including the curriculum review of 1987 and the draft National Curriculum Statement of 1988 - which themselves had antecedents. For all I know there may be papers somewhere in the archives that address some of these issues. However, I am not aware of any rigorous, high quality examination of the concept of a curriculum framework and how it might best be constructed. Any suggestion that such papers would not be necessary because of the ongoing nature of curriculum policy development is simply not satisfactory because it leaves too many important assumptions unexamined. It would not be acceptable in other policy areas with a long history - taxation for example - and it should not be acceptable in education.

The ministry's policy development process

I have urged the ministry in the context of the development of its curriculum statements to issue 'thinkpieces' which identify and address issues and options in the light of relevant theoretical and empirical research. Its response was that this is not its practice because, *inter alia*, the education community has consistently expressed satisfaction with "the nature of curriculum development which is emerging through the Ministry's policy and contractual arrangements" and the minister, as its client, "endorses [its] policy development model".³ This response begs the question whether the claimed education community and ministerial satisfaction with the existing policy development process is worth very much if papers analysing and evaluating alternative ways of proceeding have not been first prepared and published.

The process for the individual curricula starts with a letter to individuals and groups inviting them to contribute to the policy development phase. While some very general topics are suggested, no detailed identification and analysis of issues are provided. Policy advisory groups are established to work to terms of reference, set presumably by the ministry, and to make recommendations for the specification of curriculum development contracts. I sought the papers of the social science policy advisory group to discover, if I could, how the decisions for the draft social studies curriculum had been arrived at. I received the minutes of a few meetings and was informed that relevant literature was available to, or well known by, members of the advisory group, that the implications of the literature and analyses were discussed at length, and that all the submissions were carefully considered and key points taken into account. The minutes were brief and concentrated on major points and decisions.

The policy group produced no discussion papers. They did obtain a literature search but no written analysis of the material that had been examined - if any - was made available. There was one brief - two-thirds of a page - piece on the strands

³ Ministry letter dated 27 October 1994.

which considered, *inter alia*, that their focus should be 'people'. As many curricular areas from art to anthropology, from economics to education, from history to literature, are about 'people', this provided little illumination into whatever the author thought to be an important and defining characteristic of social studies. Perhaps it was again assumed that what was being dealt with was self-evident and/or unproblematic.

Do the other curriculum policy groups work in the same way as the social sciences group? With the exception of technology (a totally new curriculum 'subject'), and, perhaps, Health and Physical Well-being,⁴ no official thinkpieces of the sort I suggested have, as far as I am aware, been prepared. This method contrasts very sharply with policy development in other branches of government such as the Treasury. Policy changes in areas such as tax, financial management, fiscal responsibility, employment, the role of the Reserve Bank, the state-owned enterprises and many others have been based on extensive analyses including the examination of local and overseas theoretical and empirical research. It has not been assumed that the answers to key issues can be taken for granted. The durability of these reforms and the widespread overseas interest in them owe much to these solid foundations (see Henderson, 1996, p. 9; Teece *et al.*, 1996). These reforms have, of course, been criticised, but the extent of their intellectual underpinnings has not, as far as I am aware, been seriously questioned

Surely there is no good reason why the education policy should be approached differently.⁵ Taking important matters for granted is dangerous - dispensing with proper analysis and informed debate is not acceptable because of the risks that the lack of good policy development procedures may impose on the education of the nation's children. Some might argue that education is special. But on examination this usually means no more than 'education is important' which, of course, is true - as are many other areas of human activity. The educational process may also be particularly hard to quantify, but this means it is more - not less - important to think seriously about what we should be trying to do in education and to face up to the complexities, tensions and ambiguities involved. The importance of 'importance' in education, as in much else, lies in the need to make good decisions and in the risks and costs of poor decisions.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

The general educational directions set by *Framework*

⁴ I am aware that for the Health and Physical Well-being learning area a position paper and a literature review have been prepared by a consultant. This is encouraging.

⁵ I must here distinguish between the 'academic' side of education policy development - the curriculum and qualifications issues - and policy issues relating to education funding and administration. The Picot report on education administration, the Titter report on school property, and the Todd report on funding growth in tertiary education and training were solid attempts to address first order issues - attempts which simply do not appear to have been made by those advising the government on the more 'academic' aspects of recent reforms. This is not to infer that the non-academic exercises were wholly successful or that all relevant issues were considered.

A curriculum framework should set an overall direction for the development of school curricula and of the individual subject curricula. What sort of direction does *Framework* set? What sort of ethos does it provide?

The Foreword (p. 1) to *Framework* starts, unfortunately in my view, not with education *per se* but with the perceived needs of the economy. However, having dealt with the "challenges" of the international market place in summary fashion, the Foreword proceeds to tell us that *Framework* is based on the best of our past curriculum experience and the views of educators, the public and business, and that it responds to the need for a learning environment conducive to high standards of educational achievement and "appropriate" personal qualities. It provides a "balance" between the interests of individual students and the requirements of society and the economy. This, of course, begs all sorts of questions such as:

- What constitutes an environment that is conducive to high educational achievement?
- What are "appropriate" personal qualities and who should decide? Appropriate for whom and for what? Appropriate for the economy? In my experience the word 'appropriate' when unqualified is one people use when they are not sure what they do mean - a fudge word.
- Are the curriculum interests of students, society and the economy different, and if so what were the trade-offs and how were they resolved?; and
- What is the difference in the curricular requirements of the "society" and of its "economy"?

Having raised the prospect of an interesting discussion, the Foreword goes on to assure us that *Framework* is "coherent", that it establishes principles to give direction to all teaching and learning, and promotes new emphases important to the country's health and growth. Later we are told it is to apply to all schools, all students and to all years of schooling (p. 3). The substantive part of the Foreword concludes with assurances to the effect that *Framework* is gender inclusive (in a way that suggests that the curriculum needs of girls and boys are very different) and that it acknowledges the value of the Treaty, our "bicultural identity" and "multicultural society". However, and notwithstanding all these prescriptions, schools are to be allowed the freedom to develop programmes that are "appropriate to the needs of their students".

Again important questions arise including:

- What does 'coherent' mean in context, and how does it relate to the 'balance' to which reference is made earlier?
- If girls and boys are so different, should we not have separate national curricula for each gender? What would this mean for the curriculum for boys in those areas in which they do not do as well as girls - would it be easier in acknowledgement of their relative intellectual frailty or more demanding in the hope that this might help them close the gap? In any case, do we really have to tell teachers to treat their pupils with justice?

- What exactly is the "value" of the Treaty for schooling, and does it imply positive discrimination in favour of children of a particular ethnic minority? If there is a clash between a Treaty value and an educational value how is the conflict to be resolved?
- What is meant by our "bicultural identity" and "multicultural society", and what is the significance of these concepts to schooling?
- Does the freedom to be given to school teachers to meet the needs of their own pupils allow a school to decide, for example, that:
 - the Treaty has no particular relevance to its curriculum beyond what would in any case be provided on sound educational grounds; or that
 - pupils of both genders and all ethnic backgrounds have much in common, and that what is common is a better starting point for curriculum development and delivery than that which is not.

The answers are not provided, but some indications will emerge - at least implicitly - as we go further through the document.

Overall, what sort of general ethos or direction is indicated from the Foreword to *Framework*? I find it very hard to answer. Requirements and expectations from various quarters - local and international, personal, community and business - are raised, the existence of tensions appears to be acknowledged, and due obeisance made to current, politically correct, emphases. Will it provide the effective and durable learning environment which we should expect from a framework? Certainly not if the early pages of *Framework* are indicative of the whole. They contain no clear direction.

Consider an alternative approach from Hogben's primary syllabus of 1904 which said that the aims of teaching reading were:

... to impart to the pupils the power of fluent reading, with clear enunciation, correct pronunciation, tone, and inflexion, and expression based upon intelligent comprehension of the subject matter; to cultivate a taste for and an appreciation of good literature; and accordingly to lead the pupils to form a habit of reading good books (cited in Ewing, 1970, p. 105).

Of course this sets the direction for only one component, albeit a vital one, of the curriculum and not the whole primary curriculum let alone the whole school curriculum,⁶ and there is room for some argument about what constitutes, for example, "good" literature and books. But the contrast is striking in terms of clarity and intelligibility and the lack of reference to non-educational concepts (the Treaty, biculturalism etc.) or external requirements (such as the international marketplace). I very much prefer it.

The contrast between Hogben and *Framework* illustrates the additional burdens and responsibilities that have been placed on schools and their teachers in recent

⁶ Also, there wasn't a curriculum 'framework' in Hogben's time.

decades, and the confusion and curricular complexities that have resulted from this. A prime 'first-order' question is precisely this issue of what it is that schools should be expected to offer and what should be left to parents, communities and community organisations. The boundary of responsibility has been shifted in recent times. It is questionable whether in all cases the responsibilities are proper functions of schools and, indeed, whether moving the boundaries is in the long-term interests of children and the community in general. It is a problem that reflects the politicised nature of schooling, and the fact that many groups in society consider that the state in its provision of schooling should attend to their concerns.

The structure of *Framework*

The structure of *Framework* consists of the principles, essential learning areas and skills, attitudes and values, assessment, and the structure to be followed in the development of national curriculum statements.

The principles

Rather than consider each of the nine principles, I will focus only on the two premises which are said to form their basis:

- the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning; and
- the curriculum for all students will be of the highest quality.

The first premise is reflected in numerous references in the principles about the need to "enable" and "empower" students and to "respond" to each student's learning needs. The premise is, of course, grossly inflated. As I have pointed out elsewhere:

Is it not the case that we all live in a complex society of relationships, rights, duties and obligations, with an extensive culture and an ongoing history? It is hard to see how we can prepare young people to take their proper place in such a society if the central premise of their education is that each and everyone of them is at the centre of all teaching and learning (Irwin, 1994a, p. 4).

As for focusing on individual student needs, I have pointed out that:

The problem with a curriculum focused on needs, whether those of society, the economy or the individual student, is that it is based on changing subjective perceptions. It acknowledges few, if any, external benchmarks against which education can be judged (Irwin, 1994c, p. 7).

The logical conclusion of the emphases on individual students and their individual needs is highly individualised curricula, an idea which sits uncomfortably with a *national* curriculum which aims to set "national directions" and "consistency in classroom programmes" (*Framework* p. 3).

This concentration on the individual student may have encouraged the authors of the new science curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1993b, p. 10) to make the extraordinary statement that science learning is enhanced:

... within a supportive atmosphere of mutual respect where all the experiences, ideas, and beliefs which students bring into the learning situation are acknowledged as a basis for learning.

Science is certainly built on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before, but our new science curriculum appears to be saying that it is built on the shoulders of all. One of the striking things about scientific endeavour is that it requires the scientist to forgo the comfort of previous ideas and beliefs in a single minded, humble pursuit of the truth about the world which, when found, may disappoint, or embarrass and confound those existing "ideas and beliefs". Further, as Kelly (1995) has pointed out, "[extending constructivist research on learning] into an educational ideology that perceives the concept of social-construction as more important than that of scientific rationality can seriously undermine both effective learning and the transmission of a valid portrayal of science."

The principles descend to the absurd when, for example, the school curriculum is required to "respect ... the values of all students" - a requirement for moral relativism which is, in any case, contrary to insistence elsewhere in *Framework* (p. 21) that particular 'values' such as honesty and reliability be reinforced.

We are not told explicitly the criteria by which we should recognise "highest quality" in the curriculum, but presumably they include being "gender-inclusive, non-racist, and non-discriminatory, ... " and having a substantial element of biculturalism and multiculturalism. Much of this is, I think, mistaken at best and, at worst, encourages the wrong sort of education - one that seeks to inculcate certain views rather than give students the knowledge and concepts with which to arrive at their own opinions. The required emphases may, for example, discourage critical engagement with historical accounts involving Maori and women in New Zealand society. They reflect current politically correct emphases which, in their present form, may well not prove durable.

What is not included in the principles is, perhaps, even more remarkable than what is. For example, we find no clear reference to learning that is desirable in its own right quite irrespective of the felt needs of society, the economy or the realisation of social ideals.⁷ This is a quite astonishing and deplorable omission in a national curriculum.

Again there is no reference to wisdom. In a secular state school the beginning of wisdom is not, I suppose, to be found in "the fear of the Lord" (Proverbs 1:7) but, as T.S. Eliot observed, it would be a pity if we overlooked the possibilities of education as a means of acquiring it (Eliot, 1962, p. 99). These possibilities include the transmission of the riches of our western cultural inheritance and opening up to each new generation the thoughts of the great minds of the past as they wrestled with the tensions, ambiguities and uncertainties of the human predicament. An exposure to such works would help pupils to develop powers of discrimination - not in crass racial, gender or ethnic terms but as between good and evil, the noble

⁷ *Framework* does require the school curriculum to encourage positive attitudes to all areas of learning (p. 23). In context this appears to mean encouragement to work hard rather than to respect knowledge *per se* or, for example, to appreciate good literature - see the earlier quote from Hogben.

and the ugly, the eternal and the ephemeral, truth and propaganda, and so on (Irwin, 1994c).

The premises and principles do not, in my view, constitute a sound prescription for a durable curriculum framework. In seeking to 'be all things to all people' they confirm the legitimacy of the expectations that press in on schools from every side. Rather than riding out short-term fluctuations in intellectual fashions they are in danger of being submerged by them. On this second point, A.E. Housman warned us of :

... the house of bondage, and of the soul which is so fast in prison that it cannot get forth; which commands no outlook upon the past or the future, but believes that the fashion of the present, unlike all fashions heretofore, will endure perpetually, and that its own flimsy tabernacle of second-hand opinions is a habitation for everlasting.⁸

Essential learning areas

We do not know why *Framework* discusses content in terms of learning areas rather than subjects or why the seven chosen are considered the best ones for a national curriculum. In fact the Framework adopts a threefold approach of learning areas, subjects (subjects may contribute to learning areas) and, in the case of technology (a learning area which "has application to all subjects of the curriculum" p. 12), a cross-curricular approach.

The main advantage I can see in learning areas is that they might assist in ensuring breadth in the curriculum. But, even if this were to be a decisive argument in favour of them, why were the particular seven areas chosen? Why not, for example, 'communication', 'analytics', 'aesthetics' and 'ethics'? Indeed, why not a modern version of the medieval trivium and the quadrivium, as that remarkable woman Dorothy Sayers (Sayers, 1948) once advocated for schools? Obviously there has to be some way of breaking down and organising the school curriculum and the essential learning areas approach may be as good as any other as a first stage. In practice, most learning areas collapse into subjects notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary in *Framework*.

Pupils are required to take a "broad and balanced" (or "balanced and broad") education in their first 10 years which means taking courses within all seven areas (pp. 8-9). In the final three years the curriculum is only to be "balanced", though a "broad and balanced" education is still to be available and this is, I think, a sensible solution. In year 11 "breadth" seems to mean that pupils are to take six subjects and here we do find a mandatory core of English or Maori, mathematics and a science subject. Education in years 12 to 13 may be in "greater depth", but it is unclear what 'depth' and 'balanced' means for these years or even whether the two concepts are compatible. In fact it is not entirely clear what any of these concepts mean in practice. Given also the vagueness of the description of the learning areas and the reference to integrated, topical and thematic approaches (p. 8), 'balance' and 'breadth' would seem to allow a wide range of interpretation.

⁸ From Preface to Manilius I.

But, 'balance', 'breadth' and 'depth' are not the only concepts of importance. It is also necessary to consider the time to be given to each of the learning areas at various stages. A major weakness in *Framework* is the lack of any indication of this, and its omission will lead to problems in implementation, especially those of an overcrowded curriculum (see Howson, 1994, p. 4).

The descriptions of the individual learning areas (pp. 10-16) are a mixture of the useful, the obvious, the unclear and the unhelpful. Problems with these descriptions have been carried through to the curriculum statements. I will just give examples from three learning areas.

In **language**, *Framework* requires that in "selecting authors and texts, schools will have regard to gender balance and to the inclusion of a range of cultural perspectives". We find this concept of gender balance in the choice of materials in the English and social studies curricula. Education Forum submissions have 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); and
- ... any attempt to balance the choice of [literary] 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 1994a).

Attempts to define **technology** in curricular terms have been fraught with enormous problems in England and Wales, and the same seems to be the case here. While everyone is clear that our lives are profoundly affected by technology and it is widely accepted that it should, therefore, be represented in the school curriculum, it has been far from clear how it should be defined and delivered. Its relationship with science needs to be clarified (see Jenkins, 1994) and its scope kept within reasonable bounds. As it is, *Framework's* definition of technology seems too broad for the school curriculum and may have contributed to what appears to me to be an over-ambitious curriculum with an excess of strands whose scope stretches into wider territory such as social anthropology, threatening the integrity and coherence of the 'subject'⁹ (see Education Forum, 1994b, and Jenkins, 1994).

Framework's definition of the social sciences has, in my view, prolonged the confusion about what comprises **social studies** and gives it a spurious respectability. Its definition of the social sciences refers to history, geography and economics and seems to infer that social studies is whatever does not fall within them, i.e. "global issues", the environment, biculturalism, multiculturalism, social justice, values

⁹ The number of strands was reduced from six in the draft technology statement to three in the final statement. However, there are eight substrands in the final statement which together seem to cover much the same material as in the draft.

clarification, and the like (Irwin, 1994b). The drafts of the social studies curriculum reflect this confusion, and echo the 'political correctness' of *Framework's* principles. To the moral relativism already noted, we must now add the cultural relativism of the draft social studies statements. The Education Forum submission on the first draft expressed strong concern with, *inter alia*:

- 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 descent and modern forms of property ownership which have been so germane to economic and social progress (Education Forum 1995).

Too much of *Framework* appears to be aimed at social reconstruction of one sort or another. Take for example the requirement (p. 14) that "concern for social justice ... be fostered". *Social* justice these days appears to refer to government interventions in the welfare area, but whether they are just or constitute justice is another matter entirely. A more profitable approach could be to test the concept of justice in a variety of situations and cultural contexts, so that students can pose questions and seek to answer them. They might conclude, for example, that the justice of social welfare benefits is far from self evident, and that to the extent that it breaks the link between cause and effect it may undermine virtue (Minogue, 1995) (but then virtue, like courtesy, is a concept that does not appear in *Framework*).

What we need, I suggest, is not an education that "fosters" a particular institutional arrangement but the mental training that enables pupils to think through what might constitute justice and injustice, sense and nonsense, truth and propaganda, the beautiful and the ugly, and so on. As Bertrand Russell observed:

If we respected the rights of children, we should educate them 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" (Russell, 1961).

Essential skills

The eight groupings of essential skills have considerable prominence in *Framework*, and several of the subject curricula (e.g. the statements for English, social studies, mathematics, and technology) assure the reader that they will provide opportunity for the development of several of these skills. In fact, the social studies curriculum (both the original and revised versions) categorises many modes of learning, including critical thinking, creativity and problem solving, as 'skills'.

Framework's treatment of 'skills' is naive and unhelpful in my view. In its usual basic sense, a skill implies a specific capacity which can be perfected through practice and exercise, such as juggling, throwing or dribbling a ball, neat handwriting, playing a note correctly, finding a place on a map given its latitude and longitude, and so on. There is certainly an important element of practice involved in critical thinking, creativity and other higher order modes of thinking, but referring to them as skills may be extremely misleading. At the very least skills of a mechanical and specific practice type need to be differentiated from capacities developed in very different ways. This lack of differentiation in the National Qualifications Framework is one of the more serious problems with that model.

The development of critical thinking requires sustained periods of reasoning that conforms to rules of logic and standards of excellence. These standards are not generic but are intrinsic to distinctive forms of knowledge. A developed capacity for critical thought in mathematics does not make one critically thoughtful as a historian or a literary critic, for example. There may be some transfer and studies in formal logic, deduction and induction may be of some value. However, in general, students do not acquire critical thought in one form of knowledge by applying generic skills developed in other activities but rather through in-depth and systematic studies within that form of knowledge (see Education Forum, 1996).

Curriculum statements

In one short passage of just over a page (pp. 22-23) *Framework* lays down the structure for curriculum statements consisting of strands, aims and objectives. A large number of issues are involved, and the following discussion of them is necessarily brief.

First, the same structure is to apply to all statements. This one-structure-fits-all approach is highly problematic. The dangers include those of dividing what should be kept together and homogenising what should be kept separate. There has been a tendency to invent unnecessary strands, for example the curious 'visual language' strand in the English curriculum (Education Forum, 1994a). As already noted, the technology curriculum arguably has an excess of strands or substrands (Education Forum 1994b). In any case, surely the educationally correct approach is to consider the material to be delivered and *then* to work out how it might best be structured in curriculum terms.

Secondly, the reduction of strands into achievement aims and achievement objectives presents again the potential problems of unnecessary and unhelpful division and homogenisation which can undermine intellectual coherence. The danger, as I see it, lies more in unnecessary division. On this point J H Newman wrote:

How many writers are there ... who, breaking up their subjects into details, destroy its life, and defraud us of the whole in their anxiety about the parts (Newman 1891).¹⁰

¹⁰ Consider also Gandalf in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: "He who breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom". Those seeking to establish 'seamless' education by breaking up knowledge and skills into thousands of unit standards

Moreover, these curriculum statements are to "specify clear learning outcomes *against which students' achievements can be assessed*" (p. 5, emphasis added). Of course we should endeavour to be as clear as possible *ex ante* about what schooling aims to achieve and to assess *ex post* what it has achieved. But if 'learning outcomes' are to be so clearly defined that pupils, teachers and 'third parties' can all understand them at a glance, then curriculum documents in any subject will have to be reduced to small fragments, each in itself trivial. The assumption in this competency-based approach that we can precisely predetermine educational outcomes for assessment purposes also bedevils the qualifications framework.¹¹

Third, the statements are to cover all learning. There is no distinction between what might be considered 'core' and what might be considered optional. The lack of assistance in this matter compounds the potential for curriculum overload.

Fourthly, the objectives in all curricula are to be set out in a number of levels, usually eight, to indicate progression and continuity from year 1 to year 13. Important issues are involved here including how to order material in which there may not be a natural hierarchy of complexity or difficulty. The curricula are to go right through to school exit. Why should this be necessary when school exit examinations will determine senior school curricula? The UK authorities found their 10 level scale unnecessarily complex and prescriptive, and discontinued its use beyond year 9. And why levels and not stages or ages? We do not know. And why eight levels? Eight seems far too few to provide motivation to students and information to parents, schools and teachers. But then more levels would make the structure even more complex - there are problems in both directions. And why no curricular differentiation - there being only one curricular pathway in each subject for all students? Should the curriculum for mathematics, for example, be the same for all students whether they are going to leave school at 16 or going on to read maths at university (Howson, 1994, p. 11-12)? My own view is that the lack of provision for curricular differentiation is a major weakness in *Framework*.

These and other issues (including the important issue of pedagogy) have been raised and discussed at greater length in various Education Forum reports (see bibliography). The point I wish to stress here is that *Framework* assumes answers to a great many issues which do not appear to have been fully and explicitly analysed.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

The duty of any critic is to outline an alternative approach. Such an approach is discussed at some length in a report for the Education Forum in 1994 (Irwin 1994c).

I do not believe that there is any 'one best' curriculum structure - inevitably there are trade-offs to be made. The optimal structure may vary between countries. Some

(each with two or more 'elements' and various other ingredients) might profitably consider whether this is the 'path of wisdom' - and indeed whether 'seamlessness' can be achieved by increasing the number of seams.

¹¹ For a recent discussion of competency-based assessment in the United Kingdom see Wolf, 1995. For an examination of unit standards in the National Qualifications Framework see Irwin *et al.*, 1995.

countries which appear to achieve high educational standards have very prescriptive curricula while others also appear to do well with minimal central direction. What we in New Zealand have to do is work through the complex issues and make the best judgment we can about where the optimal solution for us lies.

My own view is that the optimal solution for New Zealand schooling at all levels is much more limited in scope than the one we now have. It would involve *inter alia*:

- a concern for the individual student within a broad historical and cultural context, and for both personal development and the acquisition of subject knowledge;
- the concept of a core curriculum the statements for which would set out in simple direct language the essential knowledge, understandings and skills that should be acquired at each form level up to and including Form 4. It would leave an increasing proportion of the school curriculum to be determined within the school (e.g. one-third in the primary years rising to half in the junior secondary years);
- stress on the importance of developing coherent programmes (not a multiplicity of achievement aims and objectives), and practical guidance about how such programmes might be constructed; and
- the recognition of different abilities and post-school aspirations among secondary children, and the need for students from Form 5 onwards to choose suitable pathways within each of which there would be several options constructed as complete programmes of study. There would be opportunities to switch pathways. Secondary schools would be allowed to specialise in quality education for technically or vocationally inclined students, i.e. curricular differentiation by school.¹²

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In my view, New Zealand missed a great opportunity between 1991 to 1993 to construct an educationally sound, flexible curriculum framework. We did not do so for various reasons including political requirements that may have been unrealistic in educational and timing terms, weaknesses in a ministry of education that was understaffed (it lost much of its curriculum expertise in various restructurings) and overloaded, and the lack of an in-depth contribution from the teaching profession that was reeling from the Picot and other reforms and lacked (and still lacks) its own professional body with a capacity for independent quality research.

As it is, we have a poorly constructed framework which has contributed to many of the unsatisfactory aspects of the curriculum statements. Two related emphases are particularly disturbing: the emphasis on teaching children what to think and not how to think, and the use of schooling to serve external purposes such as social

¹² See article by John Gray, "Britain's Painful Dilemma over Schools" in the *Guardian Weekly*, 29 September 1996, for a discussion of comprehensiveness versus curricular differentiation by school in Britain.

reconstruction. Dorothy Sayers wrote in what would 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).¹³

By this test, significant parts of what is advocated in *Framework* and related documents will be "effort spent in vain". I know many schools and teachers will reject these emphases, but it is highly disturbing that we should find them in official documents. They are most conspicuous in the social studies proposals and in the English curriculum. It is to be hoped that these points are made in submissions on the revised draft of the social studies curriculum statement.

I have argued elsewhere (Irwin 1996) that we have a strange mixture in education 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. 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). These "homeless moral passions" (Polanyi, *ibid.*) carry with them a strong sense of righteousness and moral superiority, evident in passionate judgments against social evils, including racism and sexism.

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 most 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 proper causes. My concern is that when such causes become detached from external reference points such as the concepts of truth and intrinsic worth (the religious among us would say transcendent moral obligation), they can lead to distortions and indoctrination.

The last five years of curricular development have provided much from which we should learn. In my view, we should revisit, reassess and reconstruct *Framework* in the light of that experience. A national education curriculum is too important a matter to be left in an unsatisfactory state. The Education Forum has provided a substantial and challenging analytical contribution to such an exercise in the form of its various reports and submissions. I would like to think the teaching profession (or groups within it) will also take up the challenge, come to its own considered opinion, publish it, and make representations to the educational authorities in line with its analysis. This is, I believe, essential for public schooling in a participatory democracy.

¹³ Some hundred years earlier, Mill had warned that:
"A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another. ... in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body (Mill, 1859)."

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