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**FOLLIES AND FASHIONS  
IN NEW ZEALAND EDUCATION**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In talking about follies and fashions in New Zealand education, I don't want to suggest that all education in New Zealand falls into one category or the other, or perhaps both. There is much that is good and much that needs to be supported and encouraged. In the current idiom, I don't want to 'disempower' the many at the educational coal face - in schools, colleges and universities - who are doing a great job.

The focus of this paper is mainly at the level of government and institutional policy. While in an ideal world policy and practice should be closely connected, we may well be grateful that there is often a gap between them, and, with CS Lewis, "thank the beneficent obstinacy of real mothers, real [teachers], and (above all) real children for preserving the human race in such sanity as it still possesses."<sup>1</sup> But over time policies of governments, curriculum and framework designers, and teacher educators - not to mention internationally modish ideas - do have their influence on what happens in the classroom and in the home.

**THE EDUCATION DEBATE IN NEW ZEALAND**

Christopher Woodhead<sup>2</sup>, the Chief Inspector of Schools in England, who has visited New Zealand twice in recent years, has said that education culture "should be characterised by a sense of intellectual adventure; by an enthusiasm for a critical reflection on ideas, values, assumptions, current practices; by a refusal *ever* to allow the working hypothesis to harden into unexamined orthodoxy". I agree. But we do not, in my view, have such an education culture in New Zealand.

One relevant factor about the education debate in New Zealand is that, at least from my vantage point, the great majority of participants occupy a fairly narrow segment of the possible range of viewpoints. Geoffrey Partington<sup>3</sup> notes that educational theories can be divided into five clusters, each with a different priority:

- transcendental education: what is of greatest value to God's purposes;
- instrumental education: what is of greatest value to society broadly as it is;
- liberal education: what is of greatest value to the development of the mind;
- reconstructionist education: what is of greatest value in transforming society as it is to one of a radically different character; and

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1978), *The Abolition of Man*, Collins - Fount Paperbacks, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Woodhead, C. (1995), *Education: The Elusive Engagement and the Continuing Frustration*, Ofsted Annual Lecture, London.

<sup>3</sup> Partington, G. (1997), *Teacher Education and Training in New Zealand*, Education Forum, publication pending.

- child-centred education: what is of greatest value or interest to the child.

Of course, the categories overlap and individuals can and do adopt ideas from more than one category. But from my admittedly limited perspective, the great majority of participants in the debate in New Zealand adopt approaches that fall into one of the last two categories and often into both - the reconstructionist and the child-centred. There are, of course, participants in other categories, but they can find it difficult and uncomfortable to speak out.

This narrowness of approach and sometimes personal nature of the debate may be to some extent the results of our small size, though the ease of international travel and communication can counter this to a significant degree. Given our size, we are always going to have relatively few experts in any one education specialism, and they will tend to work in one of the small number of New Zealand universities and colleges of education. They form a small pool of mostly like-minded experts from which the ministry draws for advice.

One aspect of this narrowness is that the next generation of teachers and teacher educators can be subjected to follies and fashions without significant exposure to alternative viewpoints. With the reintroduction of compulsory teacher registration, ingestion of the output of educationalists again becomes compulsory. In the view of Roger Scruton<sup>4</sup>, this has two consequences for teacher education in the United Kingdom:

- (i) It places an obstacle before the good graduate who is likely to be among those most in love with their subjects and least tolerant of what Scruton calls "pseudo-academic nonsense". Also, having good degrees, they will have better than average chances of finding jobs outside teaching. "Consequently, the single most important qualification that a teacher could have - love of a subject, and the resulting ability to make it interesting to others - cease[s] to be a qualification for teaching."
- (ii) Scruton's second point is that the next generation of teachers are initiated into the "prevailing superstitions: the hatred of grades and examinations; the idea that 'social class' [or the academic/vocational divide] is both an evil in itself and perpetuated by traditional modes of education; the idea that education should be 'relevant' to the social context of those upon whom it is inflicted." These "shibboleths" become part of the initiation of teachers and undermine for many "the certainties that really matter: that the subject they really know is worth teaching for its own sake, and that there really is a distinction between those who are good at it and those who are not."

Of course, whether Scruton's observations apply to teacher education in New Zealand is another matter. However, some of the features of New Zealand education I discuss later suggest that the possibility cannot be dismissed.

## **THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION**

In terms of Geoffrey Partington's five categories of thought, the debate in New Zealand is, I suggest, substantially between, on the one hand, the traditional liberal view about the purpose of education and, on the other, those who hold to one or both of the child-centred and reconstructionist viewpoints.

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<sup>4</sup> Scruton, R. (1984), 'On the Teaching of Teachers', *Untimely Tracts*, 3 July.

Transcendentalists are to be found in both camps, and most participants in the debate would accept that instrumental education has a role while differing on its proper extent and location.

I take the former path for reasons that will become apparent and, in my view, much, of what I see as follies and fashions are the result of taking the latter one. This is not a 'left' versus 'right' approach, though it is often presented as such. The conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott said education is:

... the transactions between the generations in which newcomers to the scene are initiated into the world which they are to inhabit. This is a world of understandings, imaginings, meanings, moral and religious beliefs, relationships, practices - states of mind in which the human condition is to be discerned as recognitions of and responses to the ordeal of consciousness. These states of mind can be entered into only by being themselves understood, and they can be understood only by learning to do so. To be initiated into this world is learning to become human; and to move within it freely is being human, which is an 'historic', not a 'natural' condition.<sup>5</sup>

For Oakeshott, education is also "a difficult engagement of learning by study in a continuous and exacting redirection of attention and refinement of understanding which calls for humility, patience and courage."

It is interesting to compare Oakeshott's views with those of Antonio Gramsci, a leading member of the Left in Europe between the two world wars, who wrote:

In education one is dealing with children in whom one has to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise), ability to concentrate upon specific subjects, which cannot be acquired without the mechanical repetition of disciplined and methodical acts ... . It is also true that it will always be an effort to learn physical self-discipline and self-control; the pupil has in effect to undergo a psycho-physical training. Many people have to be persuaded that studying too is a job, and a very tiring one, with its own particular apprenticeship - involving muscles and nerves as well as intellect. It is a process of adaptation, a habit acquired with effort, tedium and even suffering. If one wishes to produce scholars, one has to start at this point and apply pressure throughout the educational system in order to succeed in creating those thousands or hundreds or even dozens of scholars of the highest quality who are necessary to every great civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me that both the 'conservative' Oakeshott and the Marxist Gramsci were saying much the same thing about the process of education. And what they were saying is very far from the emphases we find in the principles of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* which are more on what schools must do for students - the enabling, empowering and respecting of all students - and not on what is required of students themselves such as the effort to be exerted, the tedium and difficulties to be faced, and the self-discipline required. Moreover, for both Oakeshott and Gramsci the child is to be initiated into a pre-existing world and is not, to quote the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, at the "centre of all teaching and learning".

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<sup>5</sup> From his essay *Education: the Engagement and its Frustration*.

<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, A. (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebook* (translated and edited by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith), London.

Oakeshott is a deeply unfashionable philosopher in contemporary educational circles, and it comes as no surprise that we find few references to these intellectual virtues in the curriculum documents. We find instead repeated emphases on the school curriculum as a means of creating a certain sort of person to take his or her place in a certain, preconceived sort of society. This is an approach to education which Oakeshott would call 'socialisation', by which he means "systematic apprenticeship to domestic, industrial and commercial life".

I do not, for a moment, mean to imply that education has no part to play in preparing young people for the world of work. Indeed, one of my disappointments with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is that it promises not only to trivialise much of 'academic' or 'general' education but also is unlikely to lead to quality programmes and vocational qualifications for those who, for reasons of ability or aspiration, intend to go into the workforce or trade apprenticeship on leaving school.

This workplace orientation is not, I suggest, at the heart of the educational enterprise. Education is the disinterested study of what Matthew Arnold referred to as "the best that has been done and thought". It has no extrinsic purpose. 'Socialisation', on the other hand, can, as Woodhead has suggested, only be justified in terms of goals external to itself which it is meant to achieve - social engineering, manpower planning, and the like. Oakeshott saw this substitution of 'socialisation' for education as a disaster of enormous proportions, as "the most momentous occurrence of [the twentieth] century, the greatest of the adversities to have overtaken our culture, the beginning of the dark age devoted to barbaric affluence."

If we do not recognise the deeper, intrinsic purpose of education we will be swept this way and that by educational and other fashions. This is what I see happening within New Zealand education with its emphases on biculturalism, multiculturalism, feminism, gender issues and much else. It would be nice, but naive, to think that academia would be highly resistant to unthinking adoption of follies and fashions; that our universities and other places of higher learning would help to protect society by exposing internationally modish ideas to careful analysis. In Allan Bloom's view, "the university, in a society ruled by public opinion, ... was to have been an island of intellectual freedom where all views were investigated without restriction. ... [Instead] by consenting to play an active or 'positive', a participatory role in society, the university has become inundated and saturated with the backflow of society's 'problems'. ... the university has become society's conceptual warehouse of often harmful influences."<sup>7</sup> The context here is the American university, but I suggest there is a warning here for us.

Again it would be nice but naive to think that even if the bastions against harmful influences were collapsing elsewhere in academia, at least those in schools, departments and faculties of education would hold fast because of a concern for education as initiation of the next generation into the world of learning and as a means of passing on useful knowledge and cultural riches to the next generation rather than as indoctrination or Oakeshott's 'socialisation'. To the contrary, it seems to me that in education we grasp at follies and fashions more quickly (often when they are beginning to wane elsewhere), to hold on to them longer, and to apply them with less care and more potential for injury to the public good than in other sectors of academia, the bureaucracies or the community at large.

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<sup>7</sup> Bellow, S. (1987), Foreword to Bloom, A., *The Closing of the American Mind*, Penguin Books, London, p. 18.

I do not think we can say that the educational discourse in New Zealand is generally characterised by openness to the investigation of all views without restriction - to the challenging of myths. Education, perhaps even more than other sectors, seems prepared to yield to political expedience as seen, for example, in concerns about the disproportionate 'representation' of women and Maori among academic staff and students, as if gender and ethnicity *per se* had anything to do with academic excellence or educational potential, and veneration of the Treaty, as if it had several prescient chapters on what is universally and eternally true about education. I would like to think that one day women and Maori will decide that they have had enough of the confused and matronising assumption that they need, as Ken Minogue caustically puts it, "intellectuals to represent [their] inarticulate suffering"<sup>8</sup>.

### SOME FOLLIES AND FASHIONS

#### Values

The *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* has much to say about values, for example:

- the school curriculum will ... respect the values of all students (p. 7);
- [students] will learn to respect differences of viewpoint and lifestyle ... [and school] activities should respect students' cultural perspectives and customs (p. 16); and
- [students] will explore different values and viewpoints ... [and] clarify their own values (p. 14).

It is hard to know whether to take such confusion of thought seriously. It is moral relativism gone wild. Intentionally or otherwise, in making values completely individual, it creates a moral vacuum into which all sorts of precepts can be - and are - introduced, especially those to do with gender, culture and race - and we end up with a strange mixture of moral relativism and moral dogmatism. The revised draft social studies curriculum seems to think that all opinions, feelings, thoughts, likes and dislikes constitute something called 'values', and it contains major contradictions such as upholding the right of individuals to hold different views while giving priority to various indigenous cultures which do not support this 'right'. It is deeply ironic that the impetus for developing the new national curriculum was to change the educational culture, but instead it became enmeshed in the existing culture and ended up reinforcing it.

Certainly education has a moral basis. Oakeshott's starting point was, as already noted, that education "is a difficult engagement of learning ... which calls for humility, patience and courage." This means that the student must have the opportunity to study "in conditions of direction and restraint designed to provoke habits of attention, concentration, exactness in thought and conduct." These habits of mind and intellectual virtues are undermined by indoctrination, whether this takes the form of imposing a particular view of historical events or seeking to reconstruct society.

We would do better, I suggest, to seek to instil within students attitudes and virtues directly relevant to the practice of teaching and learning, such as those to which Gramsci refers. In like vein, Oakeshott asked questions such as these:

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<sup>8</sup> Minogue, K. (1995), 'Notes on Australian Intellectual Decadence', *Adelaide Review*, December, 1995.

How does a pupil learn disinterested curiosity, patience, honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt? How does he acquire a sensibility to small differences and the ability to recognise intellectual elegance? How does he come to inherit the disposition to submit to refutation? How does he not learn merely the love of truth and justice, but learn it in such a way as to escape the reproach of fanaticism?

As regards attempting more, as James Q Wilson points out:

... children do not learn morality by learning maxims or clarifying values. They enhance their natural sentiments by being regularly induced by families, friends and institutions to behave in accord with the most obvious standards of right conduct - fair dealing, reasonable self-control, and personal honesty. A moral life is perfected by practice more than precept; children are not taught so much as habituated.<sup>9</sup>

### **Multiculturalism**

*The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* also tells us that we are a "multicultural society". But what does 'multicultural' mean? For generations there was a serious school curriculum demanding a considerable amount of knowledge - not only about our society and history but about the history, cultures and religions of other cultures. It required a working knowledge of Latin, often of classical Greek as well, along with the histories and cultures that are associated with those languages. To illustrate, here are some topics from an Oxford University scholarship entrance examination of 1831:

- the translation of 8 lines from Shakespeare into Greek iambs;
- the translation of a piece of Greek prose into English prose and then into Latin hexameters;
- an essay on "The Utility of Classical Learning";
- Latin elegiacs or Lyrics on the subject of Makarwn Vesoi;
- viva voce examination on passages in Isocrates and Lucan; and
- various questions on classical, biblical and British history and mathematics.<sup>10</sup>

This may be an extreme example from classical nineteenth century English education. But, as Roger Scruton has noted, the point is that for much of the last century and most of this one, the school curriculum required serious knowledge and:

... was not simply confined to the culture that young people imbibe from their surroundings. It involved an education in a whole series of cultures quite unrelated to each other except through accident of history. It involved studying cultures of people who had long since disappeared from the earth, studying their languages, their gods, their ways of life, their expectations, and their history. It was indeed a multicultural curriculum.<sup>11</sup>

We can find what has taken its place in the 'new' multiculturalism of the two drafts of the social studies curriculum. These are smorgasbords of bits and pieces largely from the 'here and now' and not the 'then and there'. The Education Forum submissions have documented their particular follies.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, J.Q. (1993), *The Moral Sense*, The Free Press, New York, p. 249.

<sup>10</sup> From a letter by A.C. Campbell to his father reproduced in the Balliol College Annual Record, Oxford, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Scruton, R. (1996), 'The Abolition of Thought', *The Salisbury Review*, Autumn.

Professor Ken Minogue, a distinguished academic and New Zealander by birth, summarised the revised draft as:

... [the product] of the Ministry of Education [which] has become the instrument of back stairs intrigue, taken over by a deeply unrepresentative set of people who are seeking, through apparently merely educational concerns of teaching children about the world, to change the entire direction of the country in covert fashion.

... [and] so flawed as to be impossible to salvage. Academically speaking, it would make New Zealand a laughing stock. Educationally, it reflects the declining fashions of the last half century which have resulted in a generation of children whose general incompetence is a major source of concern to Western governments. Above all, it is a political wolf in educational sheep's clothing.

I am not sure about Professor Minogue's prediction about New Zealand becoming a laughing stock, since our curriculum developers were following, in this matter as in others, reconstructionist fashions from overseas. In the United States, the equivalent curricula, or National Standards, were, as Robert Bork puts it:

... politically correct. The contributions of the West were trivialised or ignored while those of Africans and Indians were magnified; males who had played important roles in [American] history were dropped out; organisations and events that reflected poorly upon us were stressed. So outrageous were the messages the Standards would have foisted upon the young that Congress rebelled. The Senate condemned them by a vote of 99 to 1, and the lone dissenter thought the condemnation inadequate.<sup>12</sup>

Thus far our social studies curricula, the messages in which are, I suspect, at least equally, and perhaps far more, outrageous, have received no such governmental condemnation.

Certainly New Zealand is multicultural in that its population has diverse ethnic and cultural origins. But while we can accept multiculturalism in this factual sense, multiculturalism as an ideology is highly debatable. It does no service to confuse the two, as we do in various curriculum documents, by observing that New Zealand's population consists of people of diverse ethnicity and culture and then proceeding as if the ideology is beyond debate.

Orwin<sup>13</sup> notes that multiculturalism as ideology has become the moral mission of much of Western education. It has deeply influenced New Zealand education. The notion of multiculturalism depends on the relativistic understanding of 'culture' which currently dominates much of the English speaking world (Orwin). Multiculturalism is now not just a statement of fact (the existence of ethnic and cultural diversity), it is an ideology and a political statement. It embraces not only the notion of cultural relativism but the civil rights movement, the various liberation movements that began in the United States, the post-modern celebration of difference, and the anti-Americanism that became generalised into anti-Westernism (Orwin 1996).

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<sup>12</sup> Bork, R.H. (1996), *Slouching towards Gomorrah - Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, ReganBooks, HarperCollins, New York, p. 255.

<sup>13</sup> Orwin, C. (1996), 'All Quiet on the (post) Western Front?', *The Public Interest* no. 123, Spring.

If, following this relativist line of thought, all cultures must be presumed equal then there would be no reason why the education system should transmit one culture to the exclusion of others or promote one minority culture above others. It is another irony that this whole business of cultural relativism is a set of notions currently fashionable in Western, and especially English-speaking, countries and has nothing to do with traditional Maori culture which is promoted under the banner of biculturalism. And, of course, we do not, in fact, accept that all cultural practices are of equal worth and should be valued - female circumcision and footbinding or example - the strictures of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* and the drafts of the Social Studies curriculum notwithstanding. But, as has been pointed out, the appeal of multiculturalism has never depended on its theoretical consistency; its appeal is political (Orwin 1996).

It may seem profoundly shocking to suggest that what is happening in New Zealand as regards ethnic relations and social relations more generally is an example of following a widespread international fashion. The problem with fashions is, of course, that they come and, sooner or later, go. The danger of becoming locked into what will turn out to be a passing fashion is a real one.

### **Biculturalism**

The rediscovered Treaty is at the centre of much of public life in New Zealand. I suspect that nowhere has it taken such strong hold as in education. And again, any expectation that our education leaders would take a cool, detached, objective view of the Treaty and its possible implications for education would be naive in the extreme. *Au contraire*, for many educationalists veneration of the Treaty seems to be a compulsory and competitive limbo dance involving much contortion and bending backwards.

*The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* says new Zealand has a "bicultural identity". References to the Treaty, its principles and resulting obligations, 'partnership', the place of the tangata whenua, and other expressions of biculturalism will be found in many institutional mission statements and in course outlines<sup>14</sup>. Here again we find radical reconstructionism posing as education. More often than not, if we look at some of the educational ideas promoted as specifically pertaining to Maori, we find little that has anything to do with traditional Maori thought and much to do with the thinking of late twentieth century neo-Marxists whose writings can often be found in the relevant bibliographies.

To be responsible, educators promoting the Treaty as central to New Zealand education and society should, I suggest, consider carefully, and state their views on, such questions as:

- What exactly are the principles and implications for education of the Treaty, and how are they derived from it? Did the Treaty in fact seek to establish two partners rather than one people and, if so, who are the 'partners'? To what extent can Maori and non-Maori be realistically described as two collectivities? In any case, is it possible for two collectivities to be 'partners' and, if so, in what common enterprise are they engaged?
- Should Maori children be treated differently in education from those of other groups by reason only of their particular ethnic background, and, if so, why and to what extent? How could criticism of privilege and resulting potential for disharmony be answered, bearing in

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<sup>14</sup> For examples from the Christchurch and Wellington Colleges of Education see Partington, 1997, *op. cit.*

mind that low educational achievement is not restricted to Maori and that many Maori succeed.

- Is it traditional tribal culture that is being promoted and, if so, is it what most Maori want and would it be consistent with closing the educational achievement gap? In education, how could traditional tribal concepts of truth, justice, knowledge, objectivity, collectivism, notions of right and wrong be accommodated with the very different Western concepts on which our education system, and the society within which it is located, are based?<sup>15</sup>
- What sort of society is being advocated by references to biculturalism and the distinction constantly being made between 'tangata whenua' and other New Zealanders?

There are many other important questions. On the last question it seems to me that many educators are avoiding their responsibility to think very carefully about where their ideas might lead. Essentially the question is how should minorities identifying with an indigenous, pre-Western culture, relate to modern society? One part of the answer is that Maori - and Pacific Island peoples - are already very much part of Western New Zealand - they are already Westerners in terms of our constitutional and legal arrangements, and more generally the social, cultural and economic life of New Zealand to which they make a very substantial contribution. Do the educators stressing biculturalism want to change that and, if so, how and why?

In my view it is, as Melanie Phillips<sup>16</sup> has observed, perfectly possible to identify with two cultures: a common civic culture and a private ethnic one. This is what in fact we find in New Zealand. We have a broad civic culture of essentially British origin (though with European, classical and Judeo-Christian antecedents) and many minority cultures within it. But all these 'cultures', Maori and non-Maori alike, operate within a broad, common civic culture which, I suggest, is essential if we are all to live together in anything approaching harmony. A common civic culture sets limits on what each individual and group within it can do without creating disharmony. Without a common civic culture, there is, as Melanie Phillips also notes, "no reason for minorities to compromise their sometimes mutually incompatible demands. We would end up with the politics of protest, single issue lobbies, acts of violence and tribalism. It is not in the interests of either the majority or the minorities to weaken it".

Nicholas Tate, when Chief Executive of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority for England and Wales, said much the same in a British context:

There is a mistaken notion that the way to respond to cultural diversity is to try to bring everything together in some kind of watered down multi-culturalism from which all components - majority and minority - lose out. This is a mistake. 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.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion in the Australian context see Sandall, R. (1997), *An Australian Dilemma - Reconciling the Irreconcilable*, a paper presented to the Samuel Griffith Society, Canberra, March 9.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips, M. (1996), 'Unholy Pursuit of a Common Culture', *The Observer Review*, 11 February.

<sup>17</sup> Tate, N. (1995), Address to Shropshire Secondary Headteachers Annual Conference, 13

Yet, there are many educators who appear anxious to undermine our common, and, in my view, very successful, civic culture and substitute a bicultural one. Why? I suspect the answer is that many of those who advance 'progressive' Treaty ideas have simply not addressed the sort of questions asked above. For teachers of young and impressionable minds, this, if true, is highly irresponsible.

### **Feminism and Gender Issues**

Feminism comes in different forms within education. Most of us are 'feminists' in the sense that we believe men and women should be treated equally unless there are good grounds to the contrary, and most of us would find it hard to believe that such grounds exist in education. But in the education sector 'feminism' tends to mean much more.

In the school curriculum we find the view that curricula statements must give equal weight to the contributions of women and men. We find this particularly in English and social studies. The problem in the former is, as Carl Stead<sup>18</sup> has pointed out, that there was no equality in the literary contribution of men and women until relatively recent times and, as regards the latter, that the vast majority of events recorded in history relate to the deeds of men and not women. The future record is likely to be very different. But ignoring these historical facts - trying to establish some sort of *ex post* equality - is not education but indoctrination.

In employment within the education sector, the proposition that the best qualified should be appointed irrespective of gender or group representation may well be widely accepted in spheres dominated by women such as primary schooling, and especially, early childhood - but its acceptance is less apparent in secondary and tertiary sectors. Similarly, a concern to provide appropriate male role models for small boys does not appear to be widespread.<sup>19</sup>

Courses in 'gender' issues in universities and colleges of education appear to be invariably concerned with the female gender. I know of no course in 'male studies' while there are several in female studies. The title of one course, "Gender issues in Education", might suggest that there are two genders, but the course description does, in fact, go on to say that it has "an emphasis on issues concerning women from a feminist perspective".<sup>20</sup> I have no problem with academic courses on the roles, views and history of women - or of men for that matter. The important point is that they should promote critical reflection, and to achieve this it would surely be necessary to present a range of views on any one perspective and preferably a range of perspectives rather than one. To approach an issue from only one perspective suggests an intent to indoctrinate rather than to educate.

Any promotion of women in education on the grounds of group representation and not ability and performance should be deeply worrying from the perspective of students. I know of no move for the social promotion of women in occupations such as airline pilots or surgeons - and for the very good reason that our personal safety depends on the skill and not the gender of those concerned<sup>21</sup>. Yet too

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July.

18 Education Forum (1994), *English in the New Zealand Curriculum - A Submission on the Draft*, Education Forum, Auckland, April.

19 See Partington, 1997, *op. cit.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 An observation made by Kenneth Minogue, *op. cit.*, 1995. Robert Bork, *op. cit.* (pp. 218-220) records the tragic case of the death of an American female fighter pilot, Lieut. Kara

often we seem prepared to sacrifice the education of our children to the whims of fashion and to group pressure.

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Hultgreen, on an approach landing to a carrier ship in October 1994. She died as a result of "multiple instances of pilot error". She had been "permitted to continue [flying] although she had recorded seven crashes ... [a] record that would have grounded a male pilot." Ironically Lieut. Hultgreen had wanted no part of militant feminism and gender quotas and had insisted that there be "only one standard" and had argued that if lower standards for females were allowed it would be her "life on the line and [she] could get killed."

### The Obsession with Standards and Education Frameworks

What I regard as our obsession with defining standards or competencies against which to assess students and linking them on frameworks seems to be yet another example of picking up declining fashions from overseas - in this case from the United States via the United Kingdom. In the United States, 'competence-based' assessment has been particularly associated with the military and teacher education. It crossed the Atlantic to Scotland and England, first as a way of chalking up credit for unemployed school-leavers on youth training schemes, on small isolatable tasks, but then expanded into a philosophy for reforming the whole of vocational education.<sup>22</sup> In the United Kingdom this approach has encountered growing opposition, based on theoretical and empirical research, for several years.

New Zealand picked up this approach from the United Kingdom and has taken it much further - into all levels and domains of education and training from Form 5 - not just low level occupational training. Our present obsession with establishing 'clear and transparent' standards of education achievement and with linking them in a framework had gathered momentum by the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is reflected in the 1990 legislation setting up the NZQA, and the first public draft of the new curriculum framework for schools of 1991 describes itself as "a framework for the *total* school programme which links *all* the learning experiences of students in a coherent, systematic, and balanced way (emphases added)." The final document, of 1993, says that "national curriculum statements [will] specify clear learning objectives against which students' achievement can be assessed." And, of course, the National Qualifications Framework from about the same time started promoting the same objective as regards the certification of achievement of everything that moves, in terms of education and training, from F5 upwards.

Such notions of a framework remind me of what C.S. Lewis<sup>23</sup> derided as a "pragmatometer" in the last of his space trilogy novels - a device for defining the indefinable, identifying the unknowable, and connecting the unconnectable conceived by people suffering from a severe case of *hubris*. It is not just the pragmatics of the more extreme concept of a framework (such as definitional problems or the costs of assessment and moderation) that bother me. It is much more the mentality that seeks to reduce everything to numbers, to categories, to levels, to credits and removes the mystery, the uncertainty, the imaginative, the creative, the speculative, and all the other qualitative aspects about human existence and our search for the truth about our ourselves and the world about us. Above all, perhaps, it excludes the sentiments whose absence makes us into what Lewis<sup>24</sup> would call, in now politically incorrect language, 'men without chests' - that is without the meeting ground between the cerebral and the visceral which prevents us from being just one or the other.

But if such considerations are thought insufficient, we need to consider more practical issues:

- (i) There are the considerable problems in establishing 'clear and transparent' standards in curricular areas where understanding of substantial bodies of knowledge and the application of generic skills to such bodies are involved.<sup>25</sup> And surely this is exactly what much of the senior secondary school and most of university education is concerned with.

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<sup>22</sup> Smithers, A. (1997), *The New Zealand Qualifications Framework*, Education Forum, Auckland, publication pending

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1983), *That Hideous Strength*, Pan Books, London.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, 1978, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> See Elley, W.B. (1992), 'Fundamental Flaw at the Heart of the New Qualifications Plan', *The*

- (ii) Unless we break everything down into tiny bits, there is no clear pass/fail standard - and possibly not even then. If we do break everything down we fall into the behaviourist trap of thinking that the whole equals the sum of the parts, and of diminishing the integrity of what we are trying to assess. And if we seek to judge achievement across a range of concepts or knowledge we are driven not to a single standard or even to three standards - pass, merit, excellence - but to a fine gradation of achievement, and to reliance on experienced and well-socialised, but ultimately fallible, markers. This and other concerns have been traversed elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>
- (iii) More fundamentally, are we not starting in the wrong place with our obsession with linking all qualifications? Consider the senior secondary school. Is it not our *first* concern to develop a range of programmes, and courses within them, that reasonably meet the range of student ability and aspiration found in the senior secondary school, while recognising that early starters can slow down, that late starters can catch up, and that aspirations change? What logically comes next is, surely, to decide how best the particular mix of knowledge and skills should be assessed. *Then*, and only then, can we decide to what extent the results of summative assessment can be compared and linked. In practice we may well want to move in an iterative way and, yes, articulation with life beyond school is important. But I think the logical path is clear.

### **Epistemology and Pedagogy**

Epistemology and pedagogy are two vital but, again from my perspective, largely neglected areas in the New Zealand debate on education.

The nearest we got to any sort of a debate on the theory of knowledge in recent times arose out of the writings of Michael Matthews, an Australian academic who was the Foundation Professor of Science Education at Auckland University from 1992 to 1993. Matthews raised issues about the nature of knowledge and its transmission, a proper understanding of which is vital to effective teaching and learning. Yet the debate seems to have fizzled out after a highly personalised response by some New Zealand academics.<sup>27</sup> Matthews's 'error' appears to have been to question the 'constructivist' approach to teaching and learning which is influential in New Zealand science education. It seems to me we have here an example of unwillingness of education academics to engage seriously in issues that are highly relevant and important to New Zealand education - and the closing of ranks in New Zealand's small academic community against an outspoken and vigorously critical outsider. Irrespective of whether Matthews was right or wrong, he raised important issues (for example the vital difference between 'learning' and 'doing' science, between constructivism as pedagogy and constructivism as epistemology) which should have been pursued carefully and properly and with much potential benefit to New Zealand education.

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Press, 17 October.

<sup>26</sup> References to the work of assessment experts in New Zealand and the United Kingdom are to be found in the bibliography of Irwin, M. (1997), *The National Qualifications Framework: Where to Now?*, a paper presented to the Waikato Forum on Education, Hamilton, 7 August.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Matthews, M. (1995), *Challenging NZ Science Education*, The Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, and Bell, B. (Collator) (1995), *Responses to 'Challenging NZ Science Education' by Michael R. Matthews*, SMTER Centre, University of Waikato, Hamilton.

I have seen little questioning of basic assumptions about pedagogy in schools. My strong impression is that issues such as whole class teaching versus group activity, 'whole word' versus phonics in the teaching of reading, 'social' promotion versus holding children back, curricular differentiation, and streaming in its various forms are largely 'no-go' areas for debate, perhaps because they would confront established child-centred, progressive views in New Zealand education. Too often, if the issues are raised at all, the debate is in terms of stark 'either/or' categories whereas more often it is a question of seeking an optimal balance. There are, of course, some academics who question current orthodoxies in public, but there can be a personal and professional price to pay for doing so. And, of course, 'heretical' practices are carried out in schools even if not widely acknowledged.

It is surely time for New Zealand education academics and practitioners to research and debate such vital issues openly. There is too much at stake to do otherwise. For example, I see little point in applying more resources to schooling (lowering class sizes for example) without opening up the issues of pedagogy and curricular differentiation. There are good grounds for thinking that we could learn much from overseas - for example from Europe about curriculum differentiation and from East Asia about instructional practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

So what do these observations mean for education? The government can respond, if it wishes, at two levels - the institutional level and at its own policy level.

At the institutional level I would not advocate some sort of counter-indoctrination. What any government can reasonably insist on is that state-funded institutions provide clear information to students and parents about the approaches to be adopted in their programmes and courses and the range of concepts and ideas to be covered.

Secondly, the government can widen the range of perspectives available via forms of funding which break the linkage between state ownership of educational institutions and state funding, thereby encouraging the entry of private providers with alternative approaches. An educational system should foster diversity.

At the government policy level, there is much that needs to be done to improve the process of policy development by the ministry and other education agencies. First, as a general rule (and there are exceptions such as the Picot report on education administration and the Todd report on tertiary funding) we do not get quality official 'thinkpieces' which identify issues and problems and evaluate the costs and benefits of various options. The tendency has been to go straight to the first draft of what will be the eventual policy statement. This has been the process for the curriculum framework and the mostly unsatisfactory curriculum statements.<sup>28</sup> The latest Green Paper - on the NQF - is in effect a first draft of a White Paper to be issued later this year. As a draft policy statement it asserts rather than provides analysis. I understand the next Green Paper - on tertiary education - will be much the same. This is most unsatisfactory.

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<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of the curriculum framework see Irwin, M. (1996), *Curricular Confusion: The Case for Revisiting the New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, a paper presented to a seminar on implementing the curriculum, Principals Centre, University of Auckland, 18 October.

Quality analyses involve several distinct stages: identifying the problems to be addressed; analysing and evaluating different solutions; and arriving at conclusions and recommendations consistent with the analysis. In this process assumptions and information should be made explicit, and research and information strengths and weaknesses acknowledged. Tensions and trade-offs should be clearly addressed. The publication of such quality thinkpieces on important policy proposals would:

- provide an important internal discipline on education officials because the quality of their analysis (including its coverage, command of the relevant literature, knowledge of local and international developments, the explicitness of its assumptions and presuppositions, awareness of the broader educational context, the manner in which tensions and trade-offs are identified and resolved, the logical development of the analysis, and so on) would be open to scrutiny and challenge;
- greatly increase the quality of the feedback from the education and wider community (who have a right to be properly informed as a basis for consultation), and also raise the quality of the education debate which depends on professional leadership; and
- raise the standing in the education community of the ministry in particular, and hence enhance its ability to provide the education policy leadership it was established to deliver.

I would also note that educational officials show little willingness to address what I would call first order questions about, for example, the curriculum and qualifications frameworks. They may assume that since these frameworks are part of an evolving policy there is no need to revisit assumptions and raise first order issues. If so this is dangerous: it may just reinforce invalid assumptions and today's 'solution' will become tomorrow's problem.

The recent NQF Green Paper is an example of a paper on a policy that was badly formulated and about which some very obvious (and predicted) problems have emerged, but it contains no analysis of why this has happened and what might be done about it. It is largely a series of assertions, some of them dubious. The Paper submerges some critical contradictions and tensions, and any policy based on it will be unstable and unsatisfactory. A quality response to these problems would require an examination of some basic assumptions about the concept of a framework, and an evaluation of alternative models in terms of different coverage and registration criteria.

Secondly, the ministry should use as consultants whoever is best (and, of course, available) for the job. At present, it appears to use local consultants for the bulk of its work and, while some are undoubtedly excellent, in a small country we are not going to find top class people in every speciality. The argument that New Zealand is 'different' from other educational jurisdictions is, of course, partly true. But we are not that much different from many other jurisdictions. We share a lot of problems with other countries and can learn from their experiences. The ministry should be able to discern what overseas practices are not relevant to our circumstances, perhaps with the assistance of local referees.

Thirdly, the ministry and/or ERO could take a lead in raising for debate key epistemological and pedagogical issues such as those I have mentioned. The authorities in the United Kingdom have been doing this for some time, and problems identified in UK schools are also to be found here.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For example, see Ofsted's reports *Primary Matters*, and *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools* (2 reports), 1992-1994.

Finally, I suspect that we would improve education by concentrating less on specific standards of achievement and participation rates and more on what education should be. In this process we would be concerned to defend what Oakeshott called the educational engagement from beliefs which threaten to destroy it. This means not encapsulating a distorted form of education immune to attack, but opening it up to more scepticism, more probing, more analysis, less emotion. There would be less resort to simplistic 'left/right' political dichotomies or 'name-calling' on important pedagogical issues such as 'constructivism' (a term with a wide semantic range), the 'child versus the curriculum', 'learning areas versus subjects', 'group work versus direct instruction', 'phonics versus whole word', and so on.<sup>30</sup> A much healthier and more effective education system, more resistant to follies and fashions, would, in my view, result.

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<sup>30</sup> As also noted by Woodhead, 1995, *op. cit.*