

EMBARGOED UNTIL 10.00 AM THURSDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 1998

ASSOCIATION OF BULK FUNDED SCHOOLS

RESTORING SANITY TO EDUCATION

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TAUPO 24 SEPTEMBER 1998

RESTORING SANITY TO EDUCATION

The urgent task in education is to restore its sanity. I don't mean to imply that teachers have taken leave of their collective senses. Far from it. Given the policy environment in which they perform their task, it is very much to their credit that they haven't. In fact what sanity remains in education is very largely to be found in the individual schools, classrooms and homes of New Zealand.

The main source of many of the aberrations within education is the official education establishment. That schooling retains its vitality is largely due to the resistance of individual teachers to the contagion from Wellington. Your auto-immune system is still intact, but nonetheless it is my contention that this contagion is widespread and having profound and deleterious effects on schooling in New Zealand. Let me use the examples of reading and grammar.

We now have more than a generation of New Zealanders who were mostly denied any instruction when taught to read about the relationship between letters and their sounds – that is, phonics. Indeed phonics has long been a dirty word among New Zealand education officials and teacher education circles, though no doubt phonemic awareness has been taught surreptitiously in at least some of our primary – and perhaps secondary – classrooms. It has also been sustained by doughty campaigners like Doris Ferry with encouragement from courageous academics like Tom Nicholson, Bill Tunmer and Brian Thompson.

Perhaps phonics enthusiasts are beginning to come 'out of the closet'. It was certainly good to read about Don Buck Primary School in Palmerston North "going out on a limb against the official line of thought" to introduce a phonics-based programme from which "phenomenal" results were reported.¹ It is amazing to me that anyone should want to deny children one of the advantages of English which is that it is a phonetic language. Yet the so-called 'whole language' approach infects many parts of the English-speaking world. It seems to be on the wane, except in

¹ Carrol, P. (1997), "Phonic approach to reading brings 'phenomenal' results", *New Zealand Herald*, December 20.

New Zealand which is still regarded internationally as "a centre for the whole language approach"²

A recent report in *Forbes* magazine called the whole language method of teaching children to read "one of the goofiest, most destructive educational fads of recent times". It commented that "It's astonishing that what is essentially a system of guessing words could become so widespread in [American] schools, underscoring how frivolous many educational bureaucrats have become." I am not sure that "frivolous" is the word I would use, but I share the sense of amazement at the inanities of our educational bureaucrats. The article noted that California had tried this "bizarre approach" for nearly a decade, but when reading scores plunged to be the worst in America the Californian legislature decisively abandoned it.

In Britain too, the Secretary for Education in the Labour government, concerned about literacy standards, has published a framework which ensures that children learn phonics in the early years, as well as receiving clear instruction in grammar.³ I know of no such recantations and injunctions from our ministry of education.

In New Zealand, grammar too has been a casualty of the ministry of education. You will find minimal reference to grammar in the new English curriculum for our schools, notwithstanding earlier ministry assurances that the final document would "more heavily stress" the basics of reading, writing and grammar after expressions of concern at their neglect in the draft curriculum.⁴ The final document simply continued the trend away from formal instruction in the structure of language. It says "students should explore and develop an understanding of grammar". Once upon a time we had to learn and practice grammar and be drilled in it.

It is little wonder that academics in several disciplines and many employers have long been complaining that apparently well educated young people arrive at their doors unable to put a decent sentence together. Recent surveys have confirmed

² Nicholson, T. (1996), *Historical and Current Perspectives on Reading*, Paper presented to symposium on "Integrated direct instruction - balancing phonics and whole language", Oklahoma City, February.

³ Letter to the editor from David Blunkett, *The Spectator*, 25 April 1998.

⁴ Catherall, S. (1994), "Grammar Added to English Syllabus", *The Dominion*, 14 December.

what has been suspected. The IEA's study of reading literacy showed up a long tail of low achievers in reading among children.⁵ A recent study of adult literacy showed that nearly half of those aged between 16 and 65 had either very poor literary skills or could only use relatively simple printed material.⁶ I am not surprised but I am, nonetheless, appalled.

I do not for a moment pretend to be an expert in these subjects. Nor do I assume that phonics is the exclusive answer to learning reading. Those whose judgment I respect say that a range of methods and approaches is required, combined with professional judgment about when and how a particular method or combination of methods should be employed. But I am in no doubt that official policy is wrong and has been seriously wrong for a very long time. The neglect of phonics and grammar is important not just because they are fundamental to just about everything else in schooling but also because their neglect raises serious questions such as how is it that New Zealand so readily adopts overseas fads to the obvious detriment of our children. And again, how it is that we can hang on to such international fashions well after they have been abandoned or are in the process of being dismantled elsewhere?

I suspect there are several answers. Firstly, we lack rigorous, critical, sceptical, probing educational debate in New Zealand. The ministry eschews serious debate and puts up prepackaged answers in the form of Green Papers or so-called discussion documents. It makes little attempt to provide intellectual leadership on educational matters or even to explain its stance on particular issues. In short, it can get away with lack of intellectual rigour and with policy ineptitude and has been so doing for years.

But the second point is that this situation persists because we have a small educational community which is homogeneous in outlook and spends much of its time in mutual adulation. Read the articles in some of New Zealand's educational journals and you will see what I mean. It is only when organisations like the

⁵ Wagemaker, H. (ed.) (1993), *Achievement in Reading Literacy*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.

⁶ Benseman, J. (1997), "Illiteracy among adults a real and extensive issue", *New Zealand Herald*, 2 December; Ministry of Education (undated but presumably 1997), *Adult Literacy in*

Association of Bulk Funded Schools or the Education Forum speak out that any debate of significance ensues and, in my experience, the ministry then seeks to defuse it as quickly as possible, usually by ignoring any serious criticism of its proposals. Education academics and teacher unions tend to avoid serious debate by resorting to name-calling and putting those who think differently in 'boxes' to which they then attach pejorative labels – I suspect the Association of Bulk Funded Schools knows all about such tactics.

But this uniformity of outlook involves an educational credo which needs to be examined. There seems to me to be a cluster of related ideas that explain the present deeply worrying situation.

First and foremost there is, I suggest, profound and debilitating confusion within the ministry and the academic world about the purpose of schooling. The liberal view of the purpose of education contained several important notions. It assumed, for example, that education had its own intrinsic merits and required no justification external to itself. Implicit in this was the understanding that some works are of great merit and enduring value and the young needed to be exposed to them. Great literature was deemed great because it opens up the range of human possibilities and wrestles with enduring aspects of the human condition and the meaning and purpose of life. Science was seen as a process for discovering more about the physical world with the young 'standing on the shoulders of the giants that had gone before' to understand what they had seen and if possible to see a little further. And education was perceived as the means of transmitting knowledge and the best of the national culture so that the young can grow up with some familiarity with the world about them and move within it with confidence.

What we find in official documents about education is totally different, and there can be no illusions about the sea change that has taken place. We find crass references to education serving external ends incorporated in "national aims" and "strategic directions" along with educational gobbledygook like "a seamless

education system."⁷ Education is increasingly seen as serving economic ends. Thus in the foreword to the curriculum framework we find a reference to "today's and tomorrow's competitive economy" and the "need [for] a workforce which is increasingly highly skilled and adaptable" ⁸ The sheer banality of it all is amazing, especially in such an important national document, and it hasn't come from the business community but from barbarians within the educational gates. Of course, education has important implications for the economy and the workforce but it is the reductionism – the idea that the purpose of education can be reduced substantially to workplace preparation – that is deeply disturbing.

Education has become utilitarian in another important but perhaps even more disturbing way. It is seen as a means of reconstructing society. And the manner in which it is to be reconstructed is determined for us by education officials and their fellow-travellers in the education faculties and colleges. These socio-critical theorists seek to force on children via the school curricula particular views about New Zealand as a bicultural society, about the Treaty, and about gender and race, and to recreate our society according to their own prescription. They wish to force on New Zealand children their disdain for western culture and its intellectual achievements. The boundaries between indoctrination and education have indeed become blurred, and this is, in my view, a major catastrophe for New Zealand – far worse than any buffeting on the international financial markets.

Another major trend is the shift in emphasis and focus away from what is taught – the content of education – and from the teacher to the pupil. The pupil is now seen as the centre of the intellectual universe, unencumbered by existing authorities, institutions and structures, and certainly not constrained or instructed by the teacher. Children are understood to enter school with all the inner resources required for education, including moral education, awaiting only suitable opportunities and perhaps the facilitation of a teacher for release.

⁷ Smith, L. (1994), *Education for the 21st Century*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.

⁸ Ministry of Education (1993), *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, Learning Media, Wellington.

The child's self-perception is everything. Nothing must damage the apparently fragile self-esteem of our children. In the most amazing drivel I have encountered for a long time, the draft Health and Physical Education curriculum statement contains copious references to the "personal identity" and the "self-worth" of the student. These are said to be inclusive of alternative terms such as "self-esteem, "self-confidence" and "self-concept". The over-riding concept is that of "total well-being". No standard is suggested against which the worth of self might be assessed. The draft curriculum does, however, open with the statement that "Positive feelings in your heart will raise your sense of self-worth",⁹ which at least warns the reader of the inanities to follow. The curriculum claims to identify the knowledge, understandings and skills necessary to assist the development of total well-being – and not just for the students but for their communities and society as well! The message of the draft curriculum seems to be that if you follow it faithfully nirvana will be achieved for all. Much of it is psychobabble and new-ageism.

This notion of child-centred learning explains, I suggest, the aversion to phonics. The 'look-say' method, as British philosopher Roger Scruton has pointed out, makes the child and not the text the principal authority as to what is happening on the page.¹⁰ Phonics requires learning rules, and of course their exceptions, and drill; and such, it seems, are anathema to our educational bureaucrats. The same can be said of science which hitherto has required much knowledge and conformity to the rules of science when testing hypotheses about the physical world. But now, according to our new science curriculum, science is "an activity that is carried out by all people as part of their everyday life", and scientific learning is enhanced when "all the experiences, ideas, and beliefs, which students bring into the learning situation are acknowledged as a basis for learning."¹¹ This is hogwash. Simply watching flowers unfold or the effects of yeast on flour and water is not doing or learning science. And many of our notions about the world are not scientific and form no basis whatsoever for scientific learning. Learning science involves acquiring a great deal of knowledge, and doing science involves familiarity with

⁹ This is a translation of a Maori saying which in its own context may make good sense.

¹⁰ Scruton, R (1997), Foreword to Partington, G., *Teacher Education and Training in New Zealand*, Education Forum, Auckland, November, p.xiii.

scientific method. But in the new-age view the child's self-esteem is of primary importance and truth – if it exists at all as a useful concept in the mind of ministry – is secondary.

Our current obsession with 'skills' is also part of officialdom's aversion to any 'givens' in education, that is, to knowledge that has to be learnt and acquired with hard work and concentration and not simply invented by the child as and when he or she sees fit. Until quite recent times, education was concerned principally with knowledge – with things like the structure and grammar of the English language, with literature, with French irregular verbs, with names and locations of cities, rivers and mountains and with the dates of kings, queens and emperors. Such knowledge was considered important because it was part of our cultural inheritance and worth knowing for its own sake. This emphasis on knowledge did not assume that 'skills' were unimportant. Rather it was understood that the engagement with knowledge would necessarily develop skills. The point was, as Professor Kenneth Minogue has observed, "to leave pupils alone to their own thoughts and inclinations. Education was not a production line attempting to turn out creatures with fixed and determinate ideas." ¹²

'Skills' are now seen as separate to knowledge or content and to be considered separately. But quite how skills are to be acquired except in engagement with content is a puzzle. The mystery deepens with the ministry's latest Green Paper on assessment at the primary school level which refers explicitly to "the shift from a content-based curriculum to an outcomes-based curriculum".¹³ At first glance this may seem to be very appealing – after all, we are concerned that education has some results or 'outcomes'. But the Paper seems to be saying that now we have a content-less curriculum. Professor Cedric Hall has generously suggested that this extraordinary statement might be dismissed as a "bad day for the writer – he or she

¹¹ Ministry of Education (1993), *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Learning Media, Wellington, pp. 9 and 10.

¹² Minogue, K (1996), Foreword to Education Forum, *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum – A submission on the Revised Draft*, Education Forum, Auckland, October, p.ix.

¹³ Creech, W. and Donnelly, B. (1998), *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.

didn't quite mean what was written." ¹⁴ But frankly I am not sure. Most of the 'outcomes' in the curricula documents and the 'elements' in the unit standards are in fact very vague and open to wide interpretation; most are certainly not specified in traditional content form.

Professor Minogue, in comments on the revised draft of the Social Studies curriculum, views the "skills philosophy [as] an attempt to invade the child's mind and to dominate it. It sought nothing less than to get inside his or her experience and take it over." He observed that:

This new philosophy could not even leave 'creativity' alone. That, too, was to be taught in schools, just as the [revised Social Studies draft] wants children to "try out innovative and original ideas". It seems that originality grows on trees. It would be nice to see just a little bit of it in this draft.¹⁵

Of course, the openness of the curriculum merely invites those with views about the way in which society should function to use the curriculum to advance their own ideas. Our progressive educational officials and their academic fellow-travellers are not slow to use the opportunity and in doing so are, in fact, denying children the opportunity to exercise 'critical thinking' which is one of the skills promoted in the new curricula. Pupils are, it seems, only to think critically according to the norms that have been critically defined for them by our socio-critical theorists.

Biculturalism and partnership are two particularly prominent concepts in education yet neither have been defined or defended – simply asserted and thus left wide open to interpretation.¹⁶ Educationalists who promote these concepts as central to their educational concerns and institutional missions have been challenged to explain how, for example, the Treaty established two partners, in what way can Maori and non-Maori be seen as two collectivities, how can such groupings be 'partners', and in

¹⁴ Hall, C. (1998), *Student-Centred Learning: A World Class Focus*, Inaugural Address, Victoria University of Wellington, 25 August.

¹⁵ Minogue, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Fancy, H. (1997), *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Ministry of Education, Wellington, states at page 21 "Students of social studies will understand the nature of biculturalism and the partnership between Maori and Pakeha."

what common enterprise are they engaged.¹⁷ No answers have been forthcoming. I note that the Social Studies curriculum does not define a Maori so presumably allows the definition to be self-chosen, but it does define a Pakeha as "[a] New Zealand-born person of European descent who chooses to be called Pakeha to describe their ethnicity." This disenfranchises all New Zealanders who are not of European or Maori descent, those of European descent who were born outside the country, and those who would otherwise qualify but who do not wish to define their ethnicity as 'Pakeha'.¹⁸ This is just one illustration of the conceptual nonsenses – and excruciating grammar – perpetrated on New Zealanders by the politically correct establishment in Wellington.

Morality is now also an open question and again our education bureaucrats are keen to fill the vacuum. Following an international fashion, now in decline elsewhere, morality has been stripped of any objectivity and we now only have 'values' education, the sole purposes of which are to help children explore and clarify their own values and to learn to tolerate those of others. The traditional notion that some things are simply *wrong*, and that children have to be corrected and habituated into correct attitudes and behaviours, is quite foreign to the draft Health and Physical Education curriculum statement. Indeed one of the two principal writers of the draft stated that its developers attempted to "avoid the '*moral fascism*' associated with the development of appropriate *attitudes* in students (emphases in original)."¹⁹ I wonder how those who have endured the cruelties of actual fascism react to this unmaking of language. In any case, it is difficult to imagine a more individual approach to the business of how we should live together. Yet the other principal writer, in defending the draft, asks whether the final statement will be "a step backwards to the individualism of the past?"²⁰ How could such a child-centred, needs-based and values-based curriculum be considered other than highly

¹⁷ Irwin, M.D. R. (1997), *Follies and Fashions in New Zealand Education*, paper presented to the Waikato Forum on Education, University of Waikato, 7 August.

¹⁸ Fancy, H. (1997), *op cit.* p.57.

¹⁹ Culpan, I. (1996/97), "Physical Education: Liberate it or Confine it to the Gymnasium", *Delta*, 48 (2), 49 (1), p. 217.

²⁰ Tasker, G. (1996/97), "For whose Benefit? The Politics of Developing a Health Education Curriculum", *Delta*, 48 (2), 49 (1), p. 199.

individual? How could it possibly be still more individual without abolishing teachers and schools as potentially, if not actually, corrosive of the autonomy of the individual child?

This is not too outrageous a question. While I have seen no suggestion that schools should be abolished, except by over-enthusiastic promoters of the electronic classroom, the role of teachers is certainly in doubt if they are reduced to being mere facilitators. If content is belittled, if children decide their own needs, their own values, and their own rate of progress, if knowledge cannot be transmitted as some of our influential constructivists maintain, and if meaning is entirely individual as the deconstructionists would have us believe, then what need is there for teachers in the traditional sense of those who instruct on the basis of superior, substantive knowledge? In fact, the ministry has recently, in its Green Paper on teacher education, endorsed the view of teachers who see "themselves *not as 'teachers'* but as facilitators for children" (emphasis added).²¹ This view seems to be driven by an over-inflated estimation of the contributions of information technology and an aversion to 'static' skills and knowledge. 'Flexibility' seems to be the key ministry concept.

And the mention of 'flexibility' gives the ministry game away. The ministry has slipped, perhaps unconsciously, into postmodernism – that ragtaggle bunch of ideas and notions the common themes of which are that nothing is fixed, nothing is static, the individual is all-important, and flexibility is everything. What is right and good for me is fine, even if it is anathema to you. There is no Truth, only individual truths. There is nothing intrinsically worth passing on to the next generation because we all have individual and differing views about the worth of everything. There can be no analysis and debate with an aim of coming to a common view on issues, only discourses to clarify our own individual perspectives.

²¹ The Green Paper (Quality Teachers for Quality Learning – A Review of Teacher Education, Creech, W., Ministry of Education, 1997) endorsed the findings of Ramsay, P. and Oliver, D. (1995) "Capacities and Behaviours of Quality Classroom Teachers", *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, Vol. 6, No. 4.

All this is deeply disturbing. What should be done about it? Part of the answer is to identify what is going on and to speak out about it. We must go on doing this and I look forward to the day when teachers will have their own independent professional body to research, inform and make representations on educational issues. But I do not think that speaking out is enough. There will always be dangers with heavy government involvement in schooling, especially over the curriculum and teacher training. It is folly just to wait for the 'right' team in government to take charge. Perhaps they will one day but, sooner or later, the 'wrong' team will take over from the 'right' team. As long as control remains highly centralised, the curriculum is always going to be a battleground for warring factions.

The problem of heavy government direction in education is not confined to the curriculum and pedagogy. The Education Forum has published reviews or made submissions on all the main curriculum, qualifications, teacher education and assessment proposals of recent years. Many of the authors of the reports and those who have assisted the Forum in the preparation of submissions are highly distinguished academics. Their views of the ministry's proposals and decisions in these areas have ranged from disappointment to total rejection. The contention that there is something very seriously wrong with the ministry's performance in these areas cannot be attributed to the idiosyncratic views of one or two cranks from some extreme point on the ideological spectrum.

The National Qualifications Framework is just as much an educational disaster as the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and its constituent curriculum statements. Both are ill-thought out 'think-big' disasters enthusiastically promoted by a previous minister of education, Lockwood Smith. I would like to think that we have passed the high-water mark of the hubris which also led to Dr Smith's *Education for the 21st Century* with its 'command economy', quantitative approach to educational planning.²² Thankfully that document has been long since forgotten, but I am not sure that we are any further ahead. The qualifications framework has been under review for some time but the relevant Green Paper on it was of very poor quality and more than a year after submissions were made on it we have still not seen the

²² Smith, L. (1994), *Education for the 21st Century*, Learning Media, Wellington. Another of Lockwood Smith's initiatives - the Parents as First Teachers Scheme -has also recently

outcome.²³ The ministry continues to introduce its curriculum framework in spite of the most serious criticisms of it and its component statements. This hardly indicates that the lessons from recent failures of 'think-big' disasters have been learnt.

The problems with these nation-wide arrangements are essentially twofold. Firstly, if they are wrong they affect everyone, and because there are no alternative systems in place their weaknesses may not quickly come to light. Moreover, those responsible for developing and implementing the systems acquire a personal stake in them and resist criticism and change. The other main weakness is that they impose one solution to a variety of problems. We have, for example, no significant curricular or institutional differentiation at the school level. This contrasts with countries in continental Europe which generally have both. We can, and in my view should, debate these issues, but the point is that diversity and experimentation to meet the widely varying abilities and aspirations of our children are effectively precluded by the present 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

The only long-term, effective solution is to remove substantial parts of schooling policy from the centre in Wellington and give back control to the teaching professionals in schools and to parents. My prescription would have the following key components. First, the state-mandated curriculum would be severely limited to a core of core subjects, including the international 'languages' of English and maths. At the primary level the mandated curriculum might cover two-thirds of the total curriculum and reduce to, say, half at the junior secondary level. From then on a variety of programmes, reflecting the diverse interests, abilities and aspirations of our young people, would lead to a range of reputable qualifications offered by independent examining bodies.

Secondly, the state's involvement in national assessment would be limited to testing all children at, say, age 10 to see whether they have acquired the expected levels of numeracy and literacy. The tests would be externally set, administered in schools

been criticised – see Boland, M. J. (1998), "Parent Help Scheme 'Flops' ", *Weekend Herald*, August 22–23.

²³ Creech, W. (1997), *A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand: A Plan for the National Qualifications Framework*, Ministry of Education, Wellington, May.

according to a set timetable, and externally marked. The national and school results, in the form of the percentages of children achieving the desired levels, would be published. The aim would not be to assess schools but to put in place clear expectations, incentives and, where necessary, additional resources to ensure that all children, apart from those relatively few with significant disabilities, achieve the foundations on which all further education must be built. Other tests would be available but optional. This is in essence what the Education Forum has recommended in its submission on the Green Paper on national assessment.²⁴

Thirdly, all schools, both private and government, would be funded on the same basis. There is absolutely no rationale for the present distinction in funding levels between schools on the basis of ownership except, of course, to protect government schools from competition. In effect what I am advocating is that the bulk-funding formula would be extended to all schools and not just to the courageous minority of government schools which refuse to be bullied by the teacher unions. Integrated schools should be allowed to revert to private status if they wished to do so.

Fourthly, if government schools are to prosper in this more open, vigorous climate, some of their present shackles must be removed. Principals must be allowed freedom to enter into contracts with their staff, unconstrained by national awards. Schools need the flexibility to enable them to design programmes according to their own assessment of what is appropriate to the children they seek to serve. Governance arrangements need review: if parents had a more effective choice of school there would be far less need for them to be represented on governing boards. The issue of ownership of government schools would also arise and alternative forms, perhaps local educational trusts, could be considered.

If we were to introduce such reforms I think we would go far to contain the contagion to which I referred at the outset. We cannot eliminate it and fresh outbreaks are always possible, but at least we would have put in place a means of identifying and containing it. At the end of the day it is a question of whether we want all important schooling decisions to be made for us by educational bureaucrats

²⁴ Education Forum (1998), *Policy Directions for Assessment at the Primary School Level – A Submission on the Government Green Paper "Assessment for Success in Primary Schools"*, Education Forum, Auckland, August.

and their academic colleagues or by teachers and their principals working in collaboration with parents. I suggest the choice is not a difficult one.