

# The Crisis in New Zealand Schools



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# Acknowledgements and Dedication

This book is not entirely my fault.<sup>1</sup> Many people assisted in making it a far better final product than it would otherwise have been. Michael Irwin was extremely helpful in numerous ways. Roger Kerr contributed his infectious enthusiasm and encouragement, as he has done for so many others over the years. Sandra Aitken, Alison Gernhoefer, Jan Kerr and John Morris all took time out of busy days to talk to me, as did a former secondary school principal who prefers not to be named. The Education Forum provided generous financial assistance towards the book, though this should not be taken to imply that the Forum agrees with all the views expressed in it, or that the book represents the Forum's official view. It does not. Others submitted themselves to the ordeal of reading sections of the book when the manuscript was in an even more strident and less coherent form than its final version, and offered suggestions or encouragement or both. These included Lydia Austin, Stuart Boag, my father Richard, my uncle Philip Hames, Norman LaRocque, Carl Hansen, Rodney Hide, David Hunt, Tomas Kriha, Reginald Lockstone, Mary Medland, Tony Randle, Ruth Richardson and Val Wilde. Agnes-Mary Brooke, Deborah Coddington, Mark Harrison and Norman LaRocque assisted by sending me material. Needless to say, not a single one of the people named here can be assumed to agree with all the views expressed in this book; one or two would run several miles to avoid associating themselves with *any* of the views. Above all, any remaining errors, impertinencies and imbecilities are entirely my responsibility.

I cannot resist adding a more personal biographical note. In the course of writing this book I was diagnosed with a degenerative, and ultimately

terminal, neurological disease. The kindness subsequently shown to me on a personal level utterly belies the caricature too often presented of ‘the New Right’ as heartless people preaching a heartless view of our human obligations. Having moved in market liberal circles, I have come to know personally many of the people, or classes of people, most demonised by many on the political left. I number among my closest friends shocking characters like Treasury officers, Reserve Bankers, certain hated politicians, ACT New Zealand members – even employees of the Business Roundtable. If what we owe one another is merely what can be written down in a contract, as some critics allege we believe, what explains the concern that so many have shown to me? After all, I will not in the future be contributing much to the market liberal cause, or indeed to any cause except myself. Shouldn’t I have expected to find these people suddenly doing a rapid and ruthless cost–benefit calculation and deciding no longer to return my phone calls? Of course it has not worked out that way. I am not an emotional person, but I do get emotional when I consider the kindness and very genuine support given. At such moments, I almost feel, with the poet Yeats, that:

My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

This book is dedicated to all those who have given their love and support.

# Preface

Little in this book is strictly original. While I am hoping that some education specialists will read it with interest or pleasure, specialists are not my main intended audience. The book is principally aimed at the general reader. That person might be a parent concerned at the state of his own child's school, or he might simply be a citizen already vaguely aware that silly and woolly-minded ideas have been creeping into our schools, and wanting to learn more about them.

Traditionalists are a beleaguered minority in the New Zealand education debate. That debate needs to be fought on many levels. A group such as the Education Forum has for some years been producing high quality and genuinely scholarly analyses of the problems in our schools. Unfortunately their publications are little read outside a comparatively small circle. While there are other good traditionalists, their voices are also often not heard by a wider audience. My ambition was to write a book that put traditionalist arguments in such a way that they began to reach that larger audience. That is one reason why I have tried extraordinarily hard to avoid educational jargon, though I have sometimes failed in that attempt.

In this book, to avoid the clumsy 'he or she' now in common use, I have used 'he' or 'she' in a balanced way throughout.

I would be the first to admit that I am not an education expert. This entire book might be dismissed as worthless on that basis. On the other hand, "experts" often get things badly wrong, and make palpably silly claims – no more so than in the social sciences. Given the mess that our educational establishment has made of our schools, perhaps it is time for a plain speaking, occasionally rather derisive, non-expert to have a say.



PART 1  
THE CRISIS



## The State We're In

Readers of this book may wonder whether talk of a crisis in our schools is not an exaggeration. But a tendency to complacency has dogged our education system for far too long. After years of energetic reform by so-called progressive educationists – reforms which we were told would lead our schools to sunny new uplands of meaningful learning and motivated students – we appear instead to have ended up very close to the compost patch. There is ample evidence that the four ‘i’s’ – illiteracy, innumeracy, ignorance and ill-discipline – are too widespread for comfort. Moreover, given the deep inroads already made into our schools by the philosophies promoted by ‘progressive’ educationists; the travesties recently perpetrated in the form of new curricula and a new assessment regime; the shortage of good teachers; and the semi-monopoly enjoyed by too many educationists, which shields them from reality while often enabling them to impose their singular view of the world on others; there seems little relief in sight from a culture of mediocrity and under-achievement. If that does not amount to a crisis in our schools, it is difficult to see what would.

### **Illiteracy**

It should scarcely need arguing that competence in reading and writing is as important as it has ever been, and in some ways is more vital than ever. For virtually all the readers of this book, and for thousands of other New Zealanders, a life without literacy is almost unthinkable. We read and write in the course of our jobs; we read for sheer pleasure; and we

read to gain all manner of useful information. The illiterate and semi-literate fill our prisons and our dole queues. Moreover, as has been remarked ad nauseam, the number of purely unskilled jobs is falling, and may continue to fall for the foreseeable future. That probably puts an even greater premium on literacy for a person's life chances than in the past.

If we are to believe the latest International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 1996 on working-age New Zealanders, we have a problem.<sup>1</sup> The test divided the population into five levels. Level three was regarded as the minimum needed to cope with everyday life and the workforce. The survey found that a huge number of New Zealanders fell below that threshold. In 'prose literacy', which assessed comprehension of texts such as books and newspapers, only 55 per cent of New Zealanders were at level three and above. In 'document literacy', which assessed comprehension of texts in formats such as bus timetables and charts, 51 per cent were at the higher levels. In other words, just under half of all adult New Zealanders were below the minimum needed to cope with everyday life. Around 20 per cent were on level one with 'very poor literacy skills'.

It is true that this particular survey set a steep test in defining literacy and revealed a large pocket of 'illiteracy' in every country it surveyed. But New Zealand does not compare well internationally. On prose literacy New Zealand comes fifth out of 13 countries surveyed, while on document literacy we come eleventh.<sup>2</sup> Overall we come in the second half of the field. And many of the countries with a comparable score to New Zealand are places we should not feel remotely comfortable being associated with. For instance, we are just ahead of Britain. Yet there has been widespread lamentation in Britain about the decline in basic skills among school students since their state schools went 'comprehensive' a generation ago.

And we are just behind America in the survey. Yet American schools are an international laughing stock. Test scores taken by American school leavers fell drastically in the course of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> In 1983 a national commission appointed by the US Department of Education summarised its findings thus: 'Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, not even approach, those of their parents.'<sup>4</sup>

Though test scores have since edged up, they remain well below

earlier levels. One US commentator has jested that the traditional ‘three Rs’ of reading, writing and arithmetic have been replaced in government schools by ‘recycling, reproduction and racism’.<sup>5</sup> It has even been claimed seriously that illiteracy is higher in the US today than in 1840, prior to education becoming compulsory.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not that is true, if we are just behind America in any survey we are not in good company. Many countries’ education systems perform very poorly because many countries’ education systems share common follies and failures.

International surveys of our schoolchildren, as opposed to our adults, have shown New Zealand in a much more favourable light. Way back in 1970 New Zealand 14-year-olds came top out of 15 countries in an international reading survey.<sup>7</sup> Since then New Zealand has generally ranked highly in surveys, though with our good average mark masking a comparatively large difference between the good readers and the poor readers. In a survey conducted in 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) our 15-year-olds came third overall out of 32 countries.<sup>8</sup> Three domains were tested: retrieving information, interpreting texts, and reflection and evaluation. There was again a large ‘tail’ of comparatively poor readers.

Evidently it would be quite unfair to portray reading in our schools as an unmitigated disaster. Overall, however, the evidence suggests that we could, and should, be doing better. According to reading expert Tom Nicholson, of Auckland University: ‘Statistics on reading achievement in the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand all indicate that a sizeable number of children are not learning to read as well as they should’.<sup>9</sup>

Evidence for a decline in writing skills is anecdotal but fairly damning. By the 1990s university academics were constantly bemoaning the low standard of written English found among their students:

- ‘In my later years as a university teacher I encountered increasing numbers of students who failed because their writing skills were so poor that I could not discover with certainty what they had learnt’.<sup>10</sup>
- ‘Many students are unable to write clear, grammatically-correct papers, even in their final undergraduate year’.<sup>11</sup>
- ‘My touchstone is undergraduate essays. The spelling is all wrong and the number of students who have very little idea how to express themselves is disquieting. It seems to me we could get to the stage

where we are producing a whole lot of people who have no idea how to express themselves on paper'.<sup>12</sup>

- 'Whilst I was privileged to have some of the best graduate students I have ever encountered, I also had graduate students who could not write, who could not spell, who did not know the purpose of paragraphs, and who had little idea that academic essays are not merely streams of consciousness, but should have some structure that relates evidence to conclusions. ... These students were bright enough, but their education had failed them'.<sup>13</sup>

No wonder remedial English courses began sprouting on campuses. History has not recorded whether such a course was taken by any of the young scholars at Massey University who, in the lead-up to the 1996 General Election, painted 'Pay us money equal to the doll'<sup>14</sup> [sic] on the building housing the campaign office of the National Party candidate for Palmerston North, nor how many of them ended up on the 'doll'.

It is no surprise to find that by 2000 a survey of University of Canterbury academics found that all respondents reported learning difficulties of some type among their students. Many said that today's students had been let down by the 'primary and secondary school systems, flawed curricula and deficient teaching methods'. Over half commented specifically on poor writing skills.<sup>15</sup>

Early in 1999 the then Minister of Education sent the imagination exploring a variety of titillating possibilities when he announced that the findings of a taskforce on literacy were the work of a group 'compromising [sic] mostly principals and teachers'.<sup>16</sup> In many ways that statement symbolised the entire school system.

## Innumeracy

In mathematics New Zealand schools are also struggling.

- The International Adult Literacy Survey also tested for a third domain of 'quantitative literacy' – the ability to apply arithmetical operations to numbers contained in printed materials, such as calculating savings from a sale advertisement. Here New Zealanders performed even worse than in the other two domains: only 50 per cent of adults were 'literate' in this sense. And we came tenth out of the 13 countries taking part.

- A window on innumeracy in New Zealand was provided by a test or ‘skills check’ given in 1991 to applicants for the Primary Teacher Education Programme at the Auckland College of Education. Forty-one per cent could not calculate the GST-included price of an item costing \$62 prior to GST, when GST was levied at 12.5 per cent. Twenty-seven per cent could not work out the length of a pencil lined up against a ruler with its end on the 2 cm mark.<sup>17</sup> Not all the questions were answered as badly, but the results overall were hardly encouraging. Most of those sitting the test would have gone on to teach mathematics in our primary schools.
- In 1994 New Zealand participated in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, the largest and perhaps the most rigorous cross-country study of education ever undertaken. In mathematics New Zealand nine-year-olds came twentieth out of 26 countries. Our 13-year-olds came twenty-fifth out of 39 countries. Again we kept close company with Britain and America. Overall our 13-year-olds were below the international average.<sup>18</sup> This is despite our schools devoting comparatively long hours to mathematics, as they do to science.
- Better news for our educational establishment came in the form of the 2000 OECD survey, which placed New Zealand 15-year-olds third out of 32 countries for ‘mathematical literacy’.<sup>19</sup> Personally I am sceptical that our 15-year-olds are so good at mathematics, or that the rest of the world is quite so bad, even when we consider that a number of countries performing well in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study were absent from the OECD study. But even taking the result entirely at face value, we still trail the only two Asian countries participating in the OECD survey – Japan and Korea. It is the Asian countries that we must seek to emulate if we wish to set and achieve the highest standards for ourselves.

## Ignorance

Evidence for widespread ignorance among school leavers is all around us.

- A *Readers’ Digest* survey of 17-year-olds found that only three per cent could name the year Captain Cook first landed in New Zealand – surely

one of the most important dates in our history. Only one-third could correctly name two cabinet ministers besides the Prime Minister. These 17-year-olds were just one year away from gaining the vote.<sup>20</sup>

- A multi-choice general knowledge survey given to University of Canterbury students<sup>21</sup> showed some embarrassing gaps in the knowledge of our brightest and best. A third of the students thought Stalin had helped Marx write the *Communist Manifesto*. Ten per cent thought the sun rose in the west. Only four out of ten could identify Gutenberg as the inventor of the printing press; some even thought George Gershwin was responsible. There is a trendy theory by which all knowledge is simply a personal construct. But I would be very surprised if an advocate for this idea were ever to come upon a fifteenth-century edition of *Porgy and Bess*.
- Sometimes a simple anecdote can speak volumes. Australian academic Michael Matthews, a strong critic of science education in our schools, describes taking a New Zealand teachers' college class of third-year students. Out of around 15 students, not one had heard of Copernicus. (Copernicus was a key figure in the scientific revolution that took place at the end of the Middle Ages. His model of the solar system, in which the earth went round the sun, challenged the view that had lasted for well over 1,000 years, that the sun had gone round the earth). Knowing nothing about Copernicus does not mean that the reader is uneducated. But a vague idea of his significance is the type of thing an educated person should possess. Ironically, when pressed by Matthews as to who Copernicus might be, one training college student suggested he might be a famous astrologer (sic)!<sup>22</sup>
- According to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, our nine-year-olds came sixteenth out of 26 surveyed countries in science and our thirteen-year-olds came twenty-fourth out of 39 countries, though our score was just fractionally above the average for those countries. Again we were in very bad company, being behind both America and England. A repeat survey conducted in 1998 showed little difference, though nine-year-olds had shown a slight improvement in science.<sup>23</sup>
- The 2000 OECD study again tells a different story: our 15-year-olds are sixth out of 32 countries in 'scientific literacy'. Again one wonders

whether the rest of the world can really be quite that bad. Again it is sobering to recall that even in this study, we trail both of the Asian nations.

In a sense we do not need the statistics and the surveys. Just talk to an average 18-year-old. Unless he is an independent reader, he will know alarmingly little about the world around him. Unlike many of his continental European counterparts, he will have little grasp of any foreign language. He will know very little about subjects it was once believed were part of a heritage to be handed down to the young, such as English literature. His writing may well be unclear and unstructured. His mathematics may not be up to scratch. He will probably not have grasped what scientists actually do, or what science actually *is*. This may leave him a prey to any passing superstition and to the varieties of pseudo-science often found in the popular media. He will know little about the New Zealand political system. From his social studies he will have absorbed only that Western history is full of injustices, and that somehow we should all try to get along together. He will know little real geography. He will most probably draw upon only the vaguest timeline of major events in history. Yet he will have been at school for 13 years.

### III-discipline

Every new generation of young people tends to be regarded by its elders as more delinquent than the elders had been in their own youth. Clearly that cannot always be true. But to the extent that firm statistics do exist, today’s schoolchildren appear to have gained in unruliness.

- *Truancy* in secondary schools has more than doubled since 1977.<sup>24</sup>
- The number of school *suspensions* tripled between 1991, when corporal punishment was abolished, and 1998, rising from 4,297 to 12,063.<sup>25</sup> The government responded to this rise by changing the rules to make suspensions and expulsions more difficult, and giving school boards new options such as simply standing a pupil down.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, in 2000 there were still 5,108 suspensions and 16,921 stand-downs.<sup>27</sup>
- Surveys indicate alarmingly high rates of *bullying* in New Zealand schools.<sup>28</sup> One survey of intermediate school children reported 63

per cent of girls and 79 per cent of boys saying they had been physically bullied by other children at some point in their lives. Around half of that bullying occurred at school.<sup>29</sup>

- A 1997 survey by the secondary teachers' union found that 69 per cent of teachers had encountered abusive, aggressive or threatening behaviour over the previous twelve months.<sup>30</sup>

There is surely no better example of our unruly – and philistine – youth than the cancellation in 1999 by Christchurch's Court Theatre of a performance of *Macbeth*, due to the pandemonium created by students in the audience from Christchurch Boys' High – once a very traditional school, and still a school whose students are mainly from affluent backgrounds. Perhaps the line in the opening scene of the play – 'When the hurlyburly's done' – was taken too literally by the boys. Since their behaviour could in no way be blamed on economic deprivation, one naturally questions the quality of school management.

## Ignorance Breeds Ignorance

We sometimes talk about 'the cycle of disadvantage', in which social problems recur in a family from one generation to the next. It is not hard to identify a cycle of educational disadvantage, with new teachers descending on our classrooms with inadequate knowledge themselves, and thus intensifying the disadvantages for the next generation.

- It is no surprise to find the Education Review Office reporting that 'students with poor knowledge of mathematics or science can obtain entry to [primary] teacher training'.<sup>31</sup>
- In 1995 two principals of Wellington normal schools complained that the quality of teacher trainees was dropping. Many had problems with grammar, incorrect speech patterns, and worse spelling than some of the pupils they were teaching.<sup>32</sup>

## Unhappy Employers

It is easy to overrate the economic impact of formal education. A great deal of training goes on in the workplace. Whatever is behind America's recent strong economic growth, its low unemployment and its almost

unparalleled wealth, it cannot be US government schools, which, as we have already noted, are truly a national embarrassment. And whatever lies behind Britain’s economic renaissance and high levels of employment, it again strains credibility to imagine its state schools are much responsible. Clearly there is far more to creating the right economic climate than turning out people with a good education.

Thus we should resist any temptation to imagine that merely by fixing our schools we will have solved our economic problems. Accordingly, this book will not bore the reader with any talk about ‘globalisation’, ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘international competitiveness’ and other clichés of our times, many of which range from the platitudinous to the downright meaningless. In any case, there is much more to an education system than simply meeting the needs of industry. Education was once thought to be aimed at producing ‘the educated man’ – somebody whose whole life experiences were enriched by the knowledge he had acquired and by the habits he had formed in his schooling. There is little evidence of that philosophy in operation today.

Nonetheless, it would be silly to deny that our education does have an economic impact. Our employers are rightly complaining. The members of the New Zealand Business Roundtable are senior executives of companies that together account for around ten per cent of New Zealand’s total output. According to its Executive-Director, Roger Kerr, they are almost universally unhappy with the knowledge and skills of today’s school leavers.

It is not just a problem with one particular region. It is a national problem. For instance, too many bright young people come out of school unable to write well enough. They cannot express themselves accurately. And not enough of them have been trained to think properly. Some children never even learn to read. That is a shocking indictment. What sort of future in the workforce do these kids have? But they all spend an enormous number of hours at school. Somewhere the system is failing. If a survey comes out saying that in certain respects we don’t compare badly with the rest of the world, my only thought is, ‘Heaven help the rest of the world!’.<sup>33</sup>

### **‘Look, No Worse!’**

Some people claim that even if school leavers today do not seem to know very much, school leavers a generation ago were no better. They were

just as ignorant and illiterate. I am personally sceptical about that claim, though admittedly there is a paucity of good data for making such comparisons across generations. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that standards are indeed no lower today. Should we be content with a system that is simply no worse or no better than in 1970? Would we be content with a telephone system, a health system, or a transport system that was no worse or no better than a generation ago?

We are ploughing a great deal more money into our schools. We taxpayers hired all those new primary school teachers, so that classes could become much smaller. There is now a 1:19.5 teacher:pupil ratio in primary schools,<sup>34</sup> compared to teacher:pupil ratios that saw classes of 30–40 at the primary school I attended in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> Classes were larger again, or comprised children with a variety of ages, when my father went to school in the 1930s. Young people are spending longer in school than a generation ago. Education ‘experts’ have supposedly conducted much important research over this time, and have been implementing a range of ‘reforms’. State schools today may not be living in the lap of luxury. But they do have more books, more equipment and better buildings than ever before. Even the IQs of the students are rising each generation, if we are to take at face value the so-called Flynn Effect.<sup>36</sup> So why are our schools not doing better?

### **‘Don’t Blame Us’ – The Excuses**

Members of the educational establishment will often say in self-defence that education today is ‘underfunded’. If they are seriously out of touch, they will say it is ‘seriously underfunded’.<sup>37</sup> The only problem with this argument is that if our schools are underfunded today, they must have been even more underfunded throughout New Zealand’s entire history, because governments are spending more on our schools than at any time in the past. After adjusting for inflation, per pupil expenditure more than doubled between 1970 and 2000. Between 1950 and today, spending more than quadrupled.<sup>38</sup> If anything, the more money we have spent, the worse our schools appear to have grown.

Nor do international comparisons suggest that more money, by itself, is necessarily the answer. When the Third International Mathematics and Science Study was being conducted, the United States was spending three times as much per pupil as Korea.<sup>39</sup> Yet Korean children hugely outperformed American children. Bulgaria, a poor Eastern European country, outranked a host of much wealthier countries, including –

shamefully – every single ‘Anglo-Saxon’ nation (England, Scotland, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). If we prefer to believe the OECD study, we find Poland outranking Italy in both mathematics and science, and the Czech Republic outranking Germany in reading, mathematics *and* science. Improving our schools is clearly a more complex matter than simply shouting ‘Heartless government!’ a thousand times in unison, and lobbying the Minister of Education for more money.

Informed Americans have been aware of this reality ever since the 1960s, when a classic study on American schools found no relationship whatsoever between per-pupil expenditure and student achievement.<sup>40</sup> As American social scientist Thomas Sowell has put it, ‘Our schools are already turning out some of the most expensive incompetents anywhere. Making them still more expensive will not change that’.<sup>41</sup>

Another excuse often advanced for the state of our schools is that New Zealand has become a more ‘unequal’ society since 1984 – that under the economic reforms ‘the rich got richer and the poor poorer’. It is doubtful whether the poor did grow relatively poorer while Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson were at the helm. According to Statistics New Zealand the share of income of the bottom 20 per cent of households was maintained between 1982 and 1996.<sup>42</sup> New Zealand society *has* become more unequal to the extent that the top 20 per cent of earners are now earning relatively more than in the past, but that increase has come at the expense of middle-income groups – not the bottom 20 per cent. Moreover, New Zealand is scarcely alone among developed countries in experiencing rising income inequality in recent times.

But to become too fixated about what might or might not have happened under Rogernomics is to miss a much more fundamental point. There have always, in all eras, been social or economic stresses. In many countries around the world those stresses continue in far worse form than we see in New Zealand. To take just one example, the living standard of a New Zealand family on ‘our’ poverty line would probably compare quite well with that of the average Bulgarian family. But if we believe the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, Bulgarian children outsmart New Zealand children in mathematics and science.

One defence of our schools that deserves a more respectful hearing is the claim that today many children enter school less equipped to learn than in the past. The breakdown of the family, along with the rise in welfare dependency, has arguably produced a greater number of young people who, lacking proper role models and the attention of two parents,

are less inclined to learn peaceably and productively in the classroom, and more likely to exhibit various other antisocial behaviours. There does seem to be a relationship between one-parent families and lower school achievement,<sup>43</sup> particularly in the case of children who have never known a father. Thus it is possible our schools face greater challenges today from that direction. However, New Zealand is far from alone in experiencing family breakdown and rising welfare dependency; it is the experience of most Western countries over the past generation.

Given the extra resources now possessed by schools, they do not appear to have met their challenges with great success. We have good evidence that many schools are seriously under-performing. The Ministry of Education recently began ranking secondary schools according to the estimated socioeconomic status (SES) of their student intake, breaking them down into deciles. Included in the calculation of SES are factors such as family income, parents' education, and Maori status. We find great variation in exam results, even amongst schools in the same decile.<sup>44</sup> Some schools are clearly meeting the challenges much better than others, including schools in decile one – those with the lowest SES student intake. Large numbers of these schools may indeed be in dire straits. But according to the Education Review Office, '[many] succeed in delivering a high-quality education to students .... These schools demonstrate that socioeconomic factors are not an insurmountable barrier to effective school performance'.<sup>45</sup> Good leadership and motivated staff can make a huge difference to a school, as the story of Avondale College under the late Phil Raffills demonstrates. Avondale's exam results became far more impressive than the SES of its student intake would have predicted.

## Prepare for a Surreal Journey

It may be no coincidence that Raffills was firmly opposed to many of the educational philosophies that have descended on our schools in recent decades under the guise of 'child-centred' education. These philosophies, along with the political agenda that too often accompanies them, are doing great harm to a generation of schoolchildren. The promotion of these ideas is responsible above all for the crisis in our classrooms.

Thus to better understand the crisis in education, one must enter the *Alice-in-Wonderland* world of child-centred education. It is a world of contradictions, role reversals, distortions and surreal jumps in logic. It is a world in which the child almost becomes father to the man. The more

one delves into the philosophies driving education today, the more one begins to appreciate that they do not just represent a retreat from teaching; they represent a retreat from thinking. They represent a retreat from Western civilisation itself.

The next three chapters (Part 2) attempt to make sense of these philosophies and fit them into a coherent overall picture. This is no easy task. Chapter 2 argues that in all manner of ways there has been a retreat from the transmission of knowledge in our classrooms – from the reduction in content in our national curricula to the reluctance to judge any one culture as superior to any other. Chapter 3 looks at some of the trendy but fallacious ideas often invoked to justify the retreat from teaching and from standards of excellence. Most of these ideas involve a change in the balance of power between teacher and pupil: the pupil is now far less teacher-directed than common sense would suggest is wise. Chapter 4 looks at the political agenda inextricably bound up with de-emphasising legitimate knowledge. That agenda runs contrary to the views of many thousands of New Zealand parents. After digesting the educational philosophies we will be in a position to look more closely at three of our national curricula – those for social studies, science and English (Chapters 5 through 7). Each of these curricula is little short of a disaster. Chapters 8 and 9 look at another travesty – unit standards and their reincarnation as achievement standards.

After a brief examination of the state of our teachers (Chapter 10), Chapter 11 considers whether school choice – or competition between schools – is feasible. This chapter uses the old literary device of a fictional dialogue. Though the two characters, Adam and Chardin, are not based on real individuals, and though the dialogue did not literally take place, Chardin employs every argument opposed to school choice that I can recall seeing in print. All these arguments appear to fail. This finding is very important. One of the reasons that anti-academic and feeble-minded ideas have made such inroads into our schools is that too few educationists are forced to face the results of their own actions. An unelected and largely unaccountable clique of like-minded people have enjoyed a semi-monopoly status. Thus the final chapter recommends introducing school choice as the main means of tackling an entrenched culture that is failing.

## **A Big Disclaimer**

This book is not an attack on New Zealand teachers. Stripped of much of their authority over the years, feeling perpetually underpaid and little

appreciated by wider society, downgraded in their role as transmitters of knowledge by modish educational theories, filled with impractical ideas during their pre-service training, frequently not well versed in the subjects they are supposed to be teaching, sometimes embarrassed by the antics of their trade unions, and now, at the secondary level, weighed down by an unreasonable workload of internal assessment, teachers are as much victims of the system as anyone.

Many good teachers struggle on against the tide, doing their best to educate and inspire their students in the old way. And there are probably more of them out there than anyone knows. As journalist John Roughan has written, ‘Real teachers have come to resemble a beleaguered army, battling stoically on instinct and experience while trying to ignore long, insubstantial, plainly unrealistic commands from afar’.<sup>46</sup>

## PART 2

# THE PHILOSOPHIES: FOLLIES AND FALLACIES IN OUR SCHOOLS



# Introduction

## **The Best that has been Known and Said**

The child born into a New Zealand family today is scarcely different, genetically, to a child born into the most savage and ignorant tribe living two or three thousand years ago. One child may be the direct ancestor of the other. Yet the difference in their lives, their prospects and their characters will be enormous. That difference comes from what we, as the more advanced society, can give the child – the knowledge and skills we can impart, the habits and morals we can encourage, the very mental and cultural horizons that we can open up.

Obviously this job is not performed solely by schools. But the traditional view of Western education, which lasted until quite recently, was that it involved introducing children into the ways of the civilisation and culture into which they were born. Schools taught reading, writing and numeracy, because these were both fundamental in themselves and the basis for much further learning. They taught science because of its importance in understanding the world, and because science is one of our greatest cultural achievements. They taught various facts of geography and history because these were thought to constitute useful knowledge. They taught dead or foreign languages because these languages introduced young people to different cultures – not superficially, but in depth. And they taught quality literature, on the assumption that young people should be exposed to the finest things their civilisation had produced.

The traditional view of education also assumed that children, for all their charm at times, were not simply little angels waiting for a chance to spread their wings but flawed creatures with a bundle of selfish and unselfish instincts. If they were to learn, some minimal degree of order and discipline was desirable.

What I have described is often termed a liberal education – an

education that exposes young people to ‘the best that has been known and said in the world’<sup>1</sup> and equips them to choose the path they eventually take in life. A liberal education was certainly not intended to preclude young people from being creative or from thinking critically about their society. But it believed that little high-quality creativity or critical thinking would go on in an empty head – that these activities needed a basis in knowledge. To add to the useful stock of ideas, one first needed to appreciate what had already been thought; to write a good poem, one first needed to know English. Nor did a liberal education neglect the development of skills. However, it was believed that one developed skills as one went about acquiring knowledge.

It would be foolish to imagine that there was some ‘golden age’ when the idea of a liberal education was implemented everywhere. But a liberal education was no less important an ideal for that. And it should give us absolutely no comfort that New Zealand schools have been in retreat from the very idea of a liberal education for some time.

In its place, we have a tangled and sometimes contradictory amalgam of ideas and philosophies. Knowledge is downplayed. The child himself is made an authority in all manner of ways. And an agenda critical of our entire Western heritage often appears in our classrooms.

It is not the task of this book to trace in great detail the intellectual origins of the many and various ideas that have filtered through to our schools to the detriment of New Zealand children. One culprit often mentioned is the eighteenth-century continental philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau believed man had been corrupted by modern society; he thought that there was a ‘noble savage’ somewhere out there waiting to be found (he never looked); and he was generally spiritual godfather to many a mad hippy idea over subsequent centuries. His anti-family ideas seem highly convenient in light of the fact that his own five children, all illegitimate, were each packed off to an orphanage at an early age. Rousseau’s novel *Émile* anticipated many of the preoccupations of contemporary education. So did the voluminous writings of the American philosopher John Dewey.

As already noted, many of the philosophies in our schools today go under the general heading of ‘child-centred education’ – a term to which it might be thought difficult to object. After all, in education it *is* the interests of the individual child that largely concern us. Yet even such an apparently innocuous phrase as ‘the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning’<sup>2</sup> has its critics. To former teacher Reginald Lockstone, ‘this is nonsense. We live in a society that is a complex

network of relationships, rights, duties and obligations; and I cannot see that we are doing any service to the young if we give them the notion that they are at the centre of all teaching'.<sup>3</sup> I suspect he is right. After all, the world does not appear to have been created for any single individual's special benefit. Part of the process of growing up involves coming to terms with the fact that we are not at the centre of that world – or indeed at the centre of anything.

## The Retreat from Knowledge

It may seem paradoxical that as knowledge continues to expand – as scientists discover more of the human genetic code and peer deeper into the furthest recesses of the universe, as we learn more about a thousand different topics from the composition of the planets to the daily life of ancient civilisations, as new technology continues to provide better or cheaper ways of performing various tasks – the very idea of knowledge and its transmission from one generation to the next is in retreat among educators. Yet this paradox is true.

Within readings for college of education courses or university courses on education in New Zealand, and within writings by our own academics, one comes across statements such as:

Action research rejects the positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth.<sup>1</sup>

Critical theorists question the value of such concepts as individualism, efficiency, rationality and objectivity, and the forms of curriculum and pedagogy that have developed from these concepts.<sup>2</sup>

So much the worse for ‘action research’ and ‘critical theorists’. Rejecting rationality and at least an attempt at objectivity is surely to reject any chance of understanding the world.

While such views may represent one extreme, the centre ground in New Zealand education looks worrying enough. As head of the Centre for Science and Technology Education Research at the University of

Waikato, Beverley Bell has been an influential figure in science education. Bell has written that ‘knowledge cannot be transmitted’<sup>3</sup> and that ‘knowledge is the personal construction of an individual and does not exist externally to be transmitted’.<sup>4</sup>

The extreme nature of these claims seems rather alarming. Suppose I tell the reader of this book that I was born in 1961. Have I not just transmitted a new fact to the reader? It is not a very interesting fact, and for that reason the reader will soon forget it, but the information is still here on this page. If the reader was concerned to retain the knowledge in her own head, she could employ various strategies. She could underline the sentence or photocopy the relevant page of the book. She could write the information down in a book she kept of people’s birth years. She could invent a mnemonic, to help her remember the date, such as ‘That New Right Scum/Sixty-one’ or perhaps ‘Attila the Hun/Sixty-one’. And if she doubted my word she could consult the official records. In short, contrary to Bell, my year of birth does seem to be a piece of knowledge that can be fairly easily transmitted, and which exists outside of me both in various documents and in some other people’s minds.

Bell has also denied that science has its own distinctive method.<sup>5</sup>

How did we get into the situation where many educationists appear to be denying the obvious?

## **Could I Really Be Just a Brain in a Vat?**

Traditionally, left-wing thinkers such as Karl Marx tended to assume that there was a real world out there and that we could gain knowledge of that world. They believed science was progressing. More recently there has been a tendency, especially among the political left, to play down the extent to which any knowledge we gain of the world can be real and objective.

Some of this stems from legitimate concerns among philosophers about the nature of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> However, sceptical views about science, and about knowledge generally, have gone too far. For instance, American philosopher Thomas Kuhn popularised the word ‘paradigm’ by writing a well-known account of the history of science in which one paradigm gave way to another, often for less-than-rational reasons.<sup>7</sup> At times of scientific revolution, a new paradigm was adopted. According to Kuhn, the new paradigm and the old paradigm could not be compared – they were strictly ‘incommensurable’. It was easy to read Kuhn as saying that

science never progressed but simply moved from one paradigm to another.

Few physicists or biologists actually thought of their subjects in this way. However, certain interpretations of Kuhn spread like wildfire among social scientists, creating carnage in disciplines such as education. Phrases such as ‘paradigm shift’ and ‘incommensurability of paradigms’ seemed to be on everyone’s lips in certain quarters. Sure enough, Kuhn is cited by Beverley Bell. Ironically, Kuhn himself stated that science progressed, and that later scientific theories were better than earlier ones.<sup>8</sup> These qualifications to his ideas were often forgotten in the rush to ‘go Kuhn’.

Throughout history philosophers have periodically wondered whether they can ever gain firm knowledge of the world outside their own minds. Back in the seventeenth century René Descartes decided, as a thought experiment, to imagine that an evil and powerful demon was tricking him by depriving him of the evidence of his senses.<sup>9</sup> Descartes wanted to find something that could not be doubted, and then build up knowledge from there. His attempt to find his way out of his self-dug hole convinces few people today. A modern counterpart of the question ‘Can we really know anything?’ is the idea of the brain in a vat.<sup>10</sup> From the evidence of my senses I assume that there is a world out there with tables and chairs, people and animals – but can I prove it? Perhaps it is all an illusion. Perhaps I am simply a brain in a vat, hooked up to a supercomputer, and having all my experiences manipulated by very clever scientists (evil or otherwise).

You may laugh. But we should not blame philosophers for at least asking these questions. That is their job; moreover, infuriatingly, maddeningly, I may not be able to prove that I am not a brain in a vat, if by ‘prove’ we mean give an absolutely demonstrative argument simply from the evidence of my own senses. And what other firm evidence do I have? So much I am prepared to admit, if only for the sake of argument. Of course, that does not mean that any of us actually believes that we *are* brains in vats: if we did, we would not even get up in the morning, and we would soon be taken away by men in white coats.

You can lie in bed wondering whether you might be a brain in a vat. Or you can get up, face the world, and start making judgements about what might be reasonable to believe. The independent existence of other people and of ‘the world out there’ still seems overwhelmingly probable. It is the most simple explanation. Having made our little leap of faith, we find a vast number of propositions that are reasonable for us to believe. It is reasonable to believe that Russia is a large country, that Jenny Shipley was New Zealand’s first woman Prime Minister and that President

Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Maybe science never discovers the complete truth about the world, or gives a total explanation. However, science certainly seems to be advancing, even if that process simply involves the replacement of old theories by theories that better explain the world.<sup>11</sup> We are becoming better at predicting the world, and better at controlling the world. The physics of Isaac Newton was superior to the physics of his predecessors. The physics of Einstein was superior again, though it does not represent the last word.

Moreover, individual learning does not take place in isolation. As New Zealand educationist John Clark has put it: ‘What learners learn are the shared concepts and the shared expressions of the linguistic community of which they are members’.<sup>12</sup>

You may ask what all this has to do with New Zealand schools. Arguably the answer is not very much. But to the extent that educators genuinely undervalue knowledge generally, or the advance of science, they will sell our children short. There are signs that this is happening.

New Zealand recently went through an exercise in developing a new set of school curricula. In the document describing the curriculum framework almost nothing is said about the knowledge students are expected to acquire.<sup>13</sup> The individual curriculum statements are little better. Moreover, according to John Morris, headmaster of Auckland Grammar:

The content has been reduced in virtually every subject. My head of biology is distraught at fifth form biology. He believes it is too easy and that they have missed out crucial elements needed for understanding biology as a science. Chemistry is the same. In history – my own main subject – the content is reduced. The same goes for classical studies. And so it goes on. One rationale is that more and more young people are staying on at school, and they need to be catered for. But it is a shame when good material essential to understanding a subject is missed out.<sup>14</sup>

The general trend towards reducing content appears to have been going on for some years.

### **‘But the World is Changing!’**

One reason given for devaluing knowledge is that the world is changing so fast that any facts taught in schools will soon be out of date.<sup>15</sup>

The world is indeed changing, but change is nothing new. Rapid social

and technological change has been with us at least since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century. The more New Zealand children know about the world, the better positioned they will be to evaluate intelligently the changes they experience during their lives, and even to make their own contribution. Moreover, through any period of change there are many constants that remain. The more things change, the more they are the same, as they say in France. Will human nature change much? Will the great novelists who depict human nature under various social pressures suddenly become out of date? Will the experience of the next 40 years lead us to rewrite completely the history of the last 2000 years? Will the lasting appeal of certain thinkers and artists disappear? Will mathematics change much? These questions answer themselves. Will the English language change? It will, but certainly not out of recognition. Will science change? There will be new discoveries, but these will not make it a waste of time having learnt science in the first place. Indeed the more science you know, the easier it becomes to take on board the new developments. The same applies to any other subject.

As philosopher Denis Dutton has put it:

No-one was ever politically oppressed or had his or her creativity snuffed out by memorising a poem or an ordered list of the Prime Ministers of New Zealand. To the contrary, once absorbed into consciousness, such mere facts are organising signposts in a vast, internalised web of knowledge. Developing mastery of content – facts and information – excites young minds to want to know more ... The more you know, the easier it becomes to absorb new knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

In place of knowledge, the lexicon of educationists gives us ‘skills’ and ‘learning how to learn’. It is far from clear what these amount to when knowledge itself is downgraded.

### **Morality: Anything Goes**

The flight from knowledge might also be resulting in a reluctance by educationists to make moral judgements. According to the document setting out the New Zealand Curriculum Framework: ‘The school curriculum will recognise, respect, and respond to the educational needs, experiences, interests, and values of all students’.<sup>17</sup> What about the student who believes that Salmon Rushdie deserves to die for having blasphemed Allah? Or the fundamentalist Christian who wants to harass

and imprison gay people? Or the student who sees no difficulty in torturing an animal or perhaps a fellow human being for amusement? Should the school really be ‘respecting’ these particular students’ ‘values’?

There is little talk of right and wrong in the individual curriculum documents. Instead we have clarification of one’s own values and much open-mindedness in respecting other people’s values. There is a danger that morality is becoming too subjective in our curriculum – too much a matter of personal opinion or feeling rather than being based on some objective or universal criteria. We are, admittedly, entering some treacherous philosophical terrain at this point, where the going is slippery no matter which position one chooses to take. However, no schooling can ever be completely neutral on questions of morality.

One form of value subjectivism that does seem present in our school curriculum is cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the view that there is no absolute moral standard for judging between groups, but that questions of right and wrong can only be assessed from within a social group.

One major problem with cultural relativism is that it is hard to account for moral progress and moral reformers. On the face of it, Western societies have exhibited substantial moral improvement. For instance slavery and trading in slaves (along with various forms of serfdom) were once widespread on all continents. Eventually some people in Western Europe (and above all in Britain) began arguing that slavery was wrong. These people could not claim that practices such as the slave trade were wrong by the standards of their own society, because those practices were not wrong by the standards of their own society. The reformers needed to claim that these practices were wrong absolutely – in the sight of God, perhaps. Eventually their view prevailed to the point where slavery is unthinkable today in many, perhaps most, parts of the world.

To take a more recent example, those of us who protested against the 1981 Springbok Tour were presumably not arguing that apartheid was wrong according to the standards of Afrikaner society. We must have been arguing that apartheid was wrong in some universal sense. Even those in favour of the tour tended to couch their own arguments in terms of moral universals such as freedom of association.

Nobody should claim that determining right and wrong is always straightforward. However, the view that all cultural practices have the same value does seem rather fantastic. As one of our most eminent contemporary philosophers has put it, ‘At bottom, there is a deep irrationalism to cultural relativism, a denial of the possibility of *thinking* (as opposed to making noises in counterpoint or in chorus)’ [italics in the original].<sup>18</sup>

For those of us who want to retain rationality rather than simply join the chorus, that is a problem.

Unfortunately our school curricula – and particularly our social studies curriculum – are pervaded by cultural relativism. For instance, we are told that the school curriculum ‘will ensure that the experiences, cultural traditions, histories, and languages of all New Zealanders are recognised and valued’.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are cultural traditions that should not be valued. In my view, the Maori tradition of slavery should not be valued. Certain aspects of the British class system should not be valued. The Islamic tradition of treating women as second-class citizens should not be valued. Numerous examples could be given.

### **Small Child Puts Headmaster Straight**

In the loonier fringes of the retreat from knowledge, right or wrong simply ceases to exist. British journalist Melanie Phillips interviewed a primary school headmaster for whom the word ‘wrong’ ‘caused a palpable shudder’. He told her:

The knowledge of both the teacher and the child is constantly refined by the relationship between the two of them. For example, when very young children write they use their limited skills to creative effect. They may muddle up the beginning, middle and end of a story ... but the child has had a reason for writing like that. And when you look at that reason, you find you reorganise your own sense of narrative structure.

Phillips must then have queried whether the headmaster could really do away with the word ‘wrong’.

Nevertheless, said the headmaster, even he did feel obliged to ‘raise a question in the child’s mind’ over such creative constructions. So when he asked such a child why the story had been written in that way, what did the child reply? ‘The child usually says: “Because it was wrong”, which isn’t what I want to hear at all’, said the headmaster with engaging candour. Perhaps, then, in the strange new world of the modern classroom the child is indeed wiser than the teacher after all.<sup>20</sup>

What about the child whose parents do not teach him that there is a right and wrong way to write a story? As so often with radical education,

it is the children from unsophisticated or uncaring backgrounds who are most vulnerable to nutty ideas. To the truly radical educator, of course, the problem is the opposite one: all those conservative, bourgeois parents with their silly old-fashioned notions of right and wrong! If only they could be circumvented!

We fervently hope that not too many New Zealand educators follow the line of that particular British headmaster. However, our schools do share with the Anglo-Saxon world a frequent aversion to telling a child that he has the wrong answer. One American college of education has handed out to students a list of 17 ways teachers can accept or acknowledge student responses ‘without using value words’. The list included *Um-hmm*, *That’s a thought*, *That’s one possibility*, *That’s one idea*, *That’s another way to look at it*, and *I hear you*.<sup>21</sup> Similarly in New Zealand, one experienced teacher, who has taught both in Singapore and in this country, has remarked: ‘In Singapore, if a student says something silly in physics, they are told “that is wrong”. In New Zealand, they are told “that is an interesting idea”’.<sup>22</sup>

In a report on a development programme for science teachers in New Zealand one participant, after trying out an exciting new teaching technique, is quoted as gushing: ‘These kids are quite uninhibited, they have a go. And they know they can have a go, it doesn’t matter if it is wrong. There are no right or wrong answers and everybody has a go and that has been firmly established in the classroom. So each child’s answer is just as worthy as the next one’.<sup>23</sup> If that is the result of a teacher development programme, one shudders to think what a teacher undevelopment programme might look like.

Even in mathematics, where most answers are surely either right or wrong, a New Zealand educationist, in a paper that has gone before Auckland College of Education students, cites approvingly an approach to teaching that ‘requires the teacher to develop the skill of interacting with the learners to challenge, modify and extend their ideas, instead of providing “right” answers and leaving the students to make sense of their experiences’.<sup>24</sup> Errors are described in the paper as ‘alternative conceptions’.<sup>25</sup>

If knowledge cannot be directly transmitted, if learning mere facts is not too important, and if one culture is very much the same as another, where does that leave teaching in New Zealand? The answer is that our educational establishment has given up on teaching. These days teachers are supposed to be ‘facilitators’. They are also supposed to be social workers, helping children to acquire self-esteem, creativity, certain political views, and various other attitudes deemed important.

## Putting the Child in the Driving Seat: The Downgrading of the Teacher

### **The Teacher as Facilitator**

In one fairly typical Ministry of Education document the role of the teacher is itemised thus:

- Helping students learn how to learn.
- Being a learner too.
- Ensuring equity for all students.
- Creating a friendly, supportive learning environment.
- Providing learning opportunities.
- Listening to students.
- Using the students' ideas, experiences and interests.
- Challenging sensitively the ideas of students.
- Providing resources to help students learn.
- Ensuring students communicate in a variety of modes.
- Identifying and nurturing the scientific talent and interests of all students (provided that teachers are aware of the effectiveness of an open science programme which allows students to realise their potential at their own pace).
- Contributing to the planning of the school science programme.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to object to a single one of these items. However, by the time one gets to the bottom of the list it is easy to forget that certain rather basic things are missing. What about knowing one's subject? What

about being able to teach that subject in a clear and engaging manner? It is as though a list of items comprising the job description of an Anglican vicar somehow contrived to omit any mention of the Christian religion.

A very different vision of the science teacher was written as long ago as 1929, in those benighted days when education was supposedly all mind-numbing boredom. According to this writer, a successful science teacher:

... knows his own subject ... is widely read in other branches of science ... knows how to teach ... is able to express himself lucidly ... is skilful in manipulation ... is a logician ... is something of a philosopher ... is so far an historian that he can sit down with a crowd of [students] and talk to them about the personal equations, the lives, and the work of such geniuses as Galileo, Newton, Faraday and Darwin. More than all this, he is an enthusiast, full of faith in his own particular work.<sup>2</sup>

I am in no doubt as to which teacher I would prefer to learn science from. Of course the point is far broader than science: the latter description provides a splendid general portrait of a liberal educator.

The idea of teacher as facilitator, like so much that is wrong with our education system, came from North America. Schools were regarded as having been too formal in the past. The teacher was seen as too authoritarian, and the children too passive. Rather than a teacher simply telling the class something, the children were now in some sense supposed to work it out for themselves. That is supposed to lead to a more thorough understanding. Rather than being a ‘sage on stage’, a teacher is ‘a guide on the side’. Clearly this philosophy envisages a much more passive role for the teacher than was the case traditionally. Just how passive it can be is illustrated by American journalist Rita Kramer, who in researching for her book *Ed School Follies* spent a year submitting to the horrors of various US education colleges. Kramer is referring to a teacher educator who was herself a teacher:

In her third-grade classroom, she proudly told us, she waited for the children to get the idea themselves that a piece of graph paper corresponding to the square-patterned floor of the classroom could be used to make a diagram of the room. ‘It took them three days to figure it out.’ She showed no hesitation at all in telling us that she had flunked the student teacher (she recounted with relish the number of degrees he held and where they were from) who taught in a traditional way, not ‘my way’. He didn’t seem to get the idea

that the children should ‘organise the concepts’ themselves, which would lead to ‘deeper understanding’, and he had failed to see that ‘we are dealing with a new kind of population that can’t learn in the old status-quo ways’.<sup>3</sup>

It would certainly be a radically new population who would learn best this way – one from a distant galaxy, perhaps. While the graph-paper lady may represent the loonier fringes of the education world, it would be a brave person indeed who was confident that nothing as silly ever went on in New Zealand schools.

## The Fondness for Group Work

The blackboard at the front of the classroom is gone from most New Zealand primary schools, because teaching the whole class at once is deeply out of fashion. Instead, children work in small groups or on their own, with the teacher moving amongst them. The value of group work is one of the great dogmas of the teacher-as-facilitator school, and pervades many of our curricula. Whole-class teaching is stigmatised as a teacher laying down the law to rows of inert children. In contrast, working in groups supposedly engages the children. It is sometimes even argued that children learn from each other as much as they would learn from a teacher. Working in groups also supposedly helps them learn to work cooperatively with others.

One version of the teacher-as-facilitator, cited with approval as a ‘problem-centred model’ in the paper on mathematics teaching quoted earlier, is described as follows:

- The teacher selects tasks which have a high probability of being problematical for students.
- The learners work on these tasks in small groups. During this time the teacher facilitates collaborative work as a goal, as the social interaction that occurs is seen as beneficial.
- The class is reconvened as a whole for sharing. Groups present their solutions to the class, not to the teacher, for discussion. The role of the teacher in these discussions is that of facilitator and every effort is made to be non-judgemental and encouraging. The stance is used so that students are empowered and in control of their learning.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all the touchy-feely language so typical of modern educationese, there are some obvious downsides to working in small groups. Since for most of the time the teacher will not be present with any given group, how much time will those pupils actually spend ‘on task’ rather than on one of the many distractions to which children are so prone? The same question can be asked about the time children spend working on their own. Moreover, while it is true that children learn something from other children, those children, we assume, know far less about the subject being investigated than the teacher. Meanwhile, sharing out his time equitably between groups, or between individuals, can become a major management problem for the teacher. Clearly there is a role for problem-solving, for learning-by-doing, and for group work, but educationists in the Anglo-Saxon world seem to have gone completely overboard on these concepts.

Sometimes computers and the Internet are co-opted to help explain why a teacher can be more of a ‘facilitator’ these days. According to one Ministry of Education document, ‘Students are now more able to access and process information for themselves, and to communicate widely. In this way, information and communications networked tools provide greater opportunities for students to engage in self-directed learning’.<sup>5</sup>

Students can certainly access much more information these days. But there is no guarantee that it will be relevant information, or that it will be processed intelligently or processed at all. Information still needs to be absorbed and related to other relevant information, for which there is often no alternative to the traditional methods. Certainly surfing the Internet, with its myriad of distractions, is no substitute for a well-chosen book. The present author is old enough to remember when television was being hyped in some quarters as the great educational aid for the future. That sobering fact alone should make us treat with great scepticism some of the more superficial claims made about information technology by the more excited techno-enthusiasts among us.

### **‘Whole-Class’ Heretics**

Contrary to myth, teaching the whole class at once is rarely about teachers simply lecturing children. It also involves teachers posing well-judged questions to the class. Chris Woodhead, who as Britain’s chief inspector of schools fought many lonely battles for sanity in education, lamented

the dominance of individual and group work in British primary schools at the expense of whole-class teaching. According to Woodhead, whole-class teaching means that ‘teachers are likely to ask more challenging questions of their pupils and pupils to pay more attention and concentrate more on their work’.<sup>6</sup>

A better model of teaching than the teacher-as-facilitator might come from many Asian classrooms, often caricatured out of all recognition by educators in countries such as ours. According to a study of mathematics teaching to six-year-old children in England and Japan, a typical Japanese lesson:

... would include 2–5 minutes on average of teacher exposition, 20 minutes of questioning and discussion involving all the pupils, 15 minutes of individual activity, and a five-minute summary or discussion of points raised. A new concept would be introduced to the class and developed by means of the teacher posing a series of carefully planned questions, which were designed to lead children through the stages of understanding a particular process .... The clear enthusiasm of six-year-olds for mathematics, and their evident delight in the activities undertaken, which runs counter to the common perception of silent rote learning in Japanese classrooms, reflects the appropriateness and level of stimulation in the activities provided, and the effectiveness of the teaching approach.<sup>7</sup>

The study concluded by advocating more whole-class teaching in English schools.

The same lesson can be drawn for our own country from a study undertaken by the Education Review Office, in which New Zealand was compared to four countries whose primary school children out-performed ours in mathematics and science.<sup>8</sup> The study noted that in New Zealand:

... teachers typically organise the students from one classroom into several small groups for teaching, and time is allocated to group or individual activity, with minimal teacher intervention. In other countries, teachers frequently teach the whole class and then divide the students into groups that are under active supervision while children apply the material given earlier to the whole class.<sup>9</sup>

Not everyone in New Zealand education accepts the teacher-as-facilitator dogma. John Morris, headmaster of Auckland Grammar, tells teacher trainees who visit the school on section that while they are at Auckland Grammar they are ‘teachers’:

I tell them that when they get up in front of a class, the boys actually want to know about a certain subject. They don't want to be put into a child-centred voyage of discovery. That comes as a real challenge for these trainees, because they have often been in schools where facilitation is the norm. I tell them they should feel proud of being a teacher. Being a facilitator is opting out. You have done your studies. You love your subject. You like teaching it. You love the kids. Go out there and teach them – inspire them.<sup>10</sup>

Alison Gernhoefer, principal of Westlake Girls' High School, resists the teacher-as-facilitator description for similar reasons. She adds:

Teachers can easily lose their authority, unless they are the charismatic type who can be on the kids' level as well as being a teacher. That is very difficult. They need to be able to suddenly pull back. Over the years I have observed teachers coming out of training college, where they have evidently been told to get a good rapport with the children. Nothing wrong with that. But they end up getting too familiar. And then the kids take advantage of it: they are not stupid. The teacher must then ask for help, to restore some sense of order. I have seen this happen often.<sup>11</sup>

There appear to be more pitfalls to being a facilitator than students are told about at the colleges of education. Though other factors are also responsible, the loss of discipline in New Zealand schools has roughly matched the trend towards teachers becoming facilitators.

The greater informality of New Zealand classrooms can easily lead to problems with excessive noise. A study of 106 Wellington primary classrooms by two researchers from the Wellington School of Medicine found noise levels to be so high that in one-fifth of the classrooms children would have had difficulty hearing the teacher from the back of the class.<sup>12</sup> The study suggested that quieter teaching methods were desirable. Said one of the researchers: 'When I was a kid we were made to shut up, but that style of teaching has been deemed to be politically incorrect, and a much more liberal approach has been taken. The by-product of that is excessive noise'.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Obsession with Self-Esteem**

If one is teaching less content than formerly, and one's classrooms are looking less and less like places of learning, it helps to have some trendy pop-psychological terms to fall back on. No term is currently more

fashionable than ‘self-esteem’. Making children feel good about themselves, or not wanting to make them feel failures, has almost become the chief goal of education. Some educators are quite explicit about this. One secondary school principal, who did not know how many of her pupils left school with literacy problems, listed ‘knowledge of self-worth’ as one of three essentials she thought students should not leave school without.<sup>14</sup> The list did not include basic literacy.

The reluctance to group students by ability (streaming) is justified with reference to their self-esteem. So is the reluctance to correct mistakes in students’ work. Assessment and reporting practices have become hostage to the all-importance of self-esteem. For instance, in a recent study of 12 Mangere and Otara schools, 10 of which were primary, ‘the impression gained from reading some reports of low-achieving children was that these children were achieving well’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, ‘only two schools reported student achievement data in a way that was unambiguous and relatively easy for parents to interpret in relation to a standard’.<sup>16</sup> The most frequent explanation for the schools’ current reporting practices was ‘to create a positive environment for children’s learning and to enhance their self-esteem’.<sup>17</sup>

The whole ‘unit standards’ fiasco, which we will be examining in Chapter 8, was driven in large part by a concern for the self-esteem of the less academic students.

So obsessed with self-esteem is the educational establishment that the health and physical education curriculum is introduced by the words ‘Positive feelings in your heart will raise your sense of self-worth’, along with its mandatory Maori equivalent, which stand together on one page in solitary splendour.<sup>18</sup> One wonders how past generations ever managed to achieve anything without this touching piece of practical advice.

## A Culture of Well-Coiffured Ignoramuses

There are no prizes for guessing where this obsession with self-esteem comes from. ‘In some American schools’, Denis Dutton informs us, ‘children now sit in self-esteem circles saying things like “I feel good about myself” and “my hair and clothes are nice”. This is how you produce a culture of well-coiffured ignoramuses’.<sup>19</sup> He is not exaggerating. One set of materials produced for use in American classrooms has activities of quite breathtaking narcissism, such as:

Pass a hand mirror around the group and ask each child to look in the mirror and repeat the following:

‘Mirror, mirror in my hand  
Tell me why I’m the best in the land’.

After giving one reason why they are the best, each child passes the mirror on to the next person.<sup>20</sup>

The material also advises: ‘Help students become aware that it is normal to like and dislike various things about themselves. But point out that just because a student doesn’t like a particular thing about himself doesn’t make him less wonderful or less likeable’.<sup>21</sup> If Saddam Hussein has self-esteem tutorials, perhaps he says to his shrink: ‘Sure I murder children, and I’ve gassed the occasional Kurd in my time, but I have a great moustache, I am much fitter than most men my age, and I was the best torturer in the whole Middle East! I’m no less wonderful or likeable for my faults’.

Activities as silly as the American examples may soon find their way into some New Zealand classrooms. They may even be there already, since the health and physical education curriculum seems to give teachers an opening. One of its so-called achievement objectives is ‘Personal Identity and Self-Worth’. On level 2 of the curriculum:

*Students will identify personal strengths that contribute to a sense of self-worth, for example, strengths relating to their personal recreations and physical activities, their gender, their culture, their achievements, their ability to make positive contributions as a group member, and their ability to take a leadership role.*<sup>22</sup>

The orgy of praising and ego-stroking in American schools has proved embarrassingly thin on results. Korean 13-year-olds regularly perform at the top, or very near the top, in surveys of mathematical ability, while American 13-year-olds are mediocre at best. Yet in one survey only 23 per cent of Korean 13-year-olds said that they were good at mathematics, compared to 68 per cent of American 13-year-olds.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of American educational failure, a slogan spotted in an American education college – ‘we choose to feel special and worthwhile no matter what’ – gains an added irony and piquancy.<sup>24</sup>

## **Self-Esteem Without Substance is Poison Fruit**

A few common-sense facts about self-esteem need spelling out:

- The role of schools is primarily to educate, not promote self-esteem.

- The link between low self-esteem and various anti-social behaviours is not as strong as typically assumed by educators.<sup>25</sup>
- One can have too much self-esteem: we once had old-fashioned words for this, such as ‘pride’. There is even evidence that aggressive and violent people have high self-esteem. In a major review of relevant research, three authors concluded that it is ‘threatened egotism’ rather than low self-esteem that leads to violence, and that ‘an uncritical endorsement of the cultural value of high self-esteem may ... be counterproductive and even dangerous’.<sup>26</sup>
- One gains self-esteem by actually achieving things.
- The world beyond school does not constitute one long orgy of positive feedback undetached from performance. As the richest man on the planet has bluntly put it: ‘The world won’t care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something *before* you feel good about yourself.’<sup>27</sup>
- A school environment providing a wide variety of activities is an advantage, because it increases the chances of children finding activities they are good at (this is an area in which independent schools claim to have an advantage).
- By all means praise children who have done well or who have tried hard: most children enjoy, and respond to, positive feedback. Praise should be specific.
- Bathing everyone and everything in a warm shower of gushing approval is probably misguided. After a careful study of primary schools in Leeds, a British academic wrote that the indiscriminate use of praise by teachers ‘may stem from a laudable concern that children be encouraged and supported in their learning. Yet in the end ... this can be counterproductive, with children becoming confused or cynical in the face of what they may begin to see as so much mere noise’.<sup>28</sup>
- Highly narcissistic classroom exercises (such as the mirror example) would be a waste of time at best, and at worst positively harmful.

Thomas Sowell has no doubt that the obsession with self-esteem has harmed American education:

The ‘self-esteem’ doctrine is just one in a long line of educational dogmas used to justify or camouflage an historic retreat from academic education. Its success depends on the willingness of the public, elected officials, and the media to take such dogmas seriously, without the slightest evidence. American school children and American society are the ultimate victims of this gullibility.<sup>29</sup>

Alison Gernhoefer spent many years in Rotorua teaching students from poor and deprived backgrounds. Some of her pupils had very little to feel good about. She believes ‘self-esteem’ is too often used these days as an excuse:

Not by the kids themselves, but by educators. I have seen students from the most horrendous family circumstances, who rise above their backgrounds because of their attitudes. They did not want to wallow in despair. They were encouraged to jump the hurdles, and mostly they did. A school *does* need compassionate and competent and visionary leadership to lead students out of their problems. But if that support is provided, in the end ‘self-esteem’ is not an excuse for poor performance.<sup>30</sup>

## ‘Relevance’

Nobody is in favour of education being ‘irrelevant’ to the young. Moreover, to the extent that teaching can make use of children’s prior interests to make learning more interesting, nobody is against education being relevant. If the children are cricket fans, teaching averages by getting them to calculate batting and bowling averages would seem a perfectly fine strategy. However, the mantra of relevance becomes noxious when it excessively limits teaching to children’s own immediate inclinations and current experience. After all, one of the purposes of an education is to take children beyond their current state of mind and open up new vistas.

At one extreme stands an influential American psychologist who wrote: ‘no one should ever be trying to learn something for which one sees no relevance’.<sup>31</sup> The idea that small children learning the alphabet, or their times tables, or much other important knowledge, must somehow grasp the relevance of all these things is surely fantastic. The teacher knows vastly more than the children about the knowledge they will find relevant in later life.

In the name of relevance in New Zealand, various soft-option subjects have been introduced, such as ‘media studies’. The media are all around

us, and are certainly relevant in a sense: switching on the television is a natural enough inclination. But is taking media studies really getting an education? In the name of relevance we have also seen the dumbing down of more traditional subjects. According to science teacher and now education academic Lydia Austin: ‘school science textbooks have minimal mathematics; detailed explanations have given way to pretty pictures, and the notion of structured sequence in the presentation of material has almost disappeared’.<sup>32</sup>

In the name of relevance, one of the explicit aims of the science curriculum is to promote science ‘as an activity that is carried out by all people as part of their everyday life’.<sup>33</sup> Such an aim is nonsense. I do not have a particle accelerator in my backyard, nor do I have recourse to the theory of relativity when planning a journey. Perhaps I am behind the times, but my daily life bears no resemblance whatsoever to modern science.

In the name of relevance children are confronted with a wider range of choice than ever before. For instance in the English curriculum the pupils are constantly choosing, whether it be which book to read or which song lyric to transcribe. Any idea that they might benefit from the guidance of a teacher seems largely to have been jettisoned.

Our English curriculum also states that ‘the focus of programmes should be language in use within authentic contexts which are relevant to the learner and which include the learner’s own experiences’.<sup>34</sup> Just how patronising a view our educationists can take of what young people see as ‘relevant’ is indicated by at least one college of education course on teaching English reportedly containing more ‘how-to-teach’ material on *Shortland Street* than on Shakespeare.<sup>35</sup> In many secondary schools Shakespeare is scarcely taught at all. Shakespeare was described by fellow dramatist Ben Jonson as ‘not of an age, but for all time’.<sup>36</sup> To the poet Dryden, Shakespeare was ‘the man, who, of all modern and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul’.<sup>37</sup> To Alexander Pope ‘the power over our passions was never possessed in a more eminent degree, or displayed in so different instances’.<sup>38</sup> To Dr Johnson: ‘Each change of many-coloured life he drew/Exhausted worlds and then imagined new’.<sup>39</sup>

To the romantic poet Coleridge ‘myriad-minded’ Shakespeare was ‘the greatest genius that perhaps human nature has yet produced’.<sup>40</sup> And we are still only up to the early nineteenth century. In short, educated opinion in each succeeding age continued to heap superlatives on Shakespeare’s enduring relevance to the human condition. This was not

just the opinion of the English-speaking world: Shakespeare's plays are still performed all over the globe, in dozens – if not hundreds – of languages. In spite of this he is not deemed 'relevant' in many New Zealand secondary schools.

It is true that few of us have been Prince of Denmark or Queen of Ancient Egypt recently. However, a mere play written hundreds of years ago on the other side of the world can transport a student from a South Auckland classroom to an imaginative world of extraordinary richness – even if it has nothing in it about Lotto, rugby league or the income support services. It may even suggest that there is more to life than Lotto, rugby league and the income support services.

## Creativity

At the moment 'creative' and 'creativity' are words on every child-centred educationist's lips. Even in a subject such as science, it is the creativity of the scientist which tends to be stressed. Nobody would deny that creativity is a good thing. We are all in favour of it. Moreover, most of us would like to be creative ourselves. But there are only so many hours in the day, and how easy is it to teach creativity anyway?

We can all agree that art and music should be taught in schools – at lower levels to all children and at higher levels to those with special interests and talents. These subjects are fundamental to a liberal education. Too many educationists, however, seem to be putting the cart before the horse. It is common for tiny children to bring home art work of impressive quality long before they have learned to read or do arithmetic. A former secondary school headmaster currently involved in setting up a new primary school recently visited a large number of primary classrooms. He told me, 'The room is spectacular with what is on the wall. Then I ask myself: "Do I see a word? Do I see a number?" And the answer is "no"'. Are we nurturing a generation of future Leonardos, or do we have the emphasis seriously wrong? I suspect it is the latter.

Formal teaching about the structures of English was generally phased out in the seventies. These days even correcting bad spelling or grammar frequently goes by the board, partly on the grounds of its interfering with creativity and 'spontaneity'. Too much time in English classes is spent on 'creative writing' compared to report and essay writing. Employers do not complain that school leavers cannot write a poem. They complain that they cannot write a letter. University academics do not complain that their students' novels lack imagination. They complain

that they cannot write a well-structured essay with a logical succession of ideas. Writing essays teaches children to think logically, which is one of the most important things a liberal education can impart.

By aiming too high, we may satisfy nobody. We may all at one time or another feel stirred to write a poem. There is nothing wrong with that; it is cheaper than consulting the doctor, and fun while the mood lasts. Unfortunately, most of our literary output will be complete rubbish; we simply do not have the talent. Genuinely good creative writers are rare. The idea that ‘everyone can be a creative writer’ is one of those silly, supposedly democratic ideas that scarcely stands a second’s scrutiny. Everyone can be an opera singer, but the results would sound – and look – horrendous.

How do we nurture a future Shakespeare? We probably cannot. Our best chance is probably to teach schoolchildren more rigorously the structures of the English language. Only by absorbing these does a writer have the capacity to make the fine distinctions needed in genuine creativity.

How do we nurture a second Rutherford? Presumably by teaching real science – not science-made-easy, science-made-relevant, science-made-politically-correct, science-with-pretty-pictures, science-that-stresses-creativity, science-with-lots-of-Maori-words-in-it, or any other watered-down variety. The genuine creativity can come later in the child’s life – much later.

As Melanie Phillips has put it:

Creativity is like freedom itself: it flourishes only within a clear framework of moral and intellectual boundaries. Remove the enclosing structures and all that remains is a vacuum of anarchic impulses which are deeply hostile to creativity. Many of the greatest figures of English and world culture, after all, were subjected to precisely the kind of rigid educational disciplines that so offend contemporary educationists.<sup>41</sup>

## The Whole Person

‘Progressive’ educators sometimes make the extraordinarily ambitious claim that they are interested in ‘the whole person’. New Zealand’s health and physical education curriculum seems to betray such hubris. Anyone hoping that this curriculum might limit itself to a few, possibly achievable, basics – such as teaching healthy physical exercise and explaining why smoking is bad for us – should perhaps be compelled to read the entire

document as penance for his optimism. The curriculum is concerned with the total ‘well-being’ of its students. It goes on about personal identity and self-worth. It defines well-being as having physical, mental and emotional, social, and even spiritual aspects.<sup>42</sup> There is also a great deal about relationships with other people.

Before inflicting this curriculum on the nation the Ministry of Education should have heeded the caustic warning of Thomas Sowell:

Ambitious educational goals seldom seem to evoke the question as to whether we have the capability of achieving them. Nor are these ambitions noticeably moderated by the educational system’s abysmal failure at teaching the most basic skills. That educators who have repeatedly failed to do what they are hired to do, and trained to do, should take on sweeping roles as amateur psychologists, sociologists, and social philosophers seems almost inexplicable – except that they are doing it with other people’s money and experimenting on other people’s children.

There is only one way to deal with ‘the whole person’ – and that is superficially ...

Educational theory too often focusses on the *desirability* of doing something, to the complete exclusion of the question of our *capability* of doing it. No doubt it would be far more desirable to travel through the air like Superman, instead of inching along in a traffic jam. But that is no reason to leap off skyscrapers. Our educational system is full of the results of leaping off skyscrapers [*italics in the original*].<sup>43</sup>

## ‘Learning is Like Playing’

Two related ideas that are far too popular in ‘progressive’ circles is that all true learning must be enjoyable, and that learning is more like play than work. In an influential but confused article written a generation ago, New Zealand educationist Don Holdaway prefigured a number of the woolly ideas that were increasingly to dominate New Zealand education.<sup>44</sup> Besides arguing against the correction of children’s work, Holdaway claimed that the assumption that learning was work was doing great harm to New Zealand children, stating in all seriousness that ‘almost all we know about learning is at variance with a work concept’.<sup>45</sup> For Holdaway the word ‘work’ gave off almost wholly negative vibes.

Yet such an idea is nonsense. Work of many kinds is frequently enjoyable, absorbing and rewarding. We call these activities ‘work’

because we are engaging in them with a seriousness of purpose and a degree of effort absent when merely playing around. Most learning should certainly be work in this sense. The idea that children learn best through ‘play’ seems fantastic. On the other hand, while learning is frequently enjoyable, it need not always be:

- More Japanese twelfth graders say they dislike mathematics than American twelfth graders,<sup>46</sup> but we all know which group is better at mathematics.
- In a recent American study, children taught reading by the ‘whole-language’ method (darling of many ‘progressive’ educators) demonstrated more positive attitudes towards reading than children taught by the ‘phonics’ method (favoured by many traditionalists). The phonics children were better readers, however.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the all-learning-must-be-fun school simply shut their eyes to the fact that sometimes trade-offs need to be made. We all want classrooms to be fun places, and we all want them to be places where children learn. If we lived in the best of all possible worlds, perhaps learning would be one perpetual ecstasy – but we do not. Just as in every other area of life, sensible trade-offs may need to be made – choices that the learning-must-be-fun school have simply fantasised away. Meanwhile, many children still complain that school is boring.

## The Flight from Structure

In deference to the creativity, spontaneity, self-esteem, imagination, tender ego or social conscience of New Zealand children, there has been a flight from teaching structure in our schools – from the structure of the English language to multiplication tables. The disinclination to teach structure begins in the earliest years. To an outsider it may seem obvious that teachers should convey to infants the knowledge that English letters stand for sounds – that the word ‘cat’ is spelt thus because it stands for a ‘c’ sound, an ‘a’ sound and a ‘t’ sound – and coach children on some specific letter–sound relationships. In other words, it may seem obvious that reading instruction should include so-called phonics. After all, English words are broken down into a useful phonetic code. English is thankfully not Chinese, where a huge number of different characters all need to be learned separately, making written Chinese especially difficult to acquire.

Yet as the writer on education Agnes-Mary Brooke has put it, ‘what seems blindingly obvious to the layman may take decades to strike home to education fundamentalists’.<sup>48</sup> Phonics is still stigmatised as dehumanising, and remains almost a rude word in many quarters. The dominant ‘whole-language’ approach gives no systematic instruction on letter–sound relationships. The result is a long tail of poor readers.<sup>49</sup>

Formal teaching of English grammar was largely phased out in the 1970s. Grammar, too, was regarded as boring and demotivating. It was believed that children would pick up grammar as they gained confidence in writing. The result is large numbers of young people who manage to go through university and into the workforce without knowing where a sentence should end, or where to place an apostrophe.

The disregard for structure can be seen right across the curricula. In the social studies curriculum the past comes across as an unstructured, more or less random series of events, with no sense of one event following another. According to Michael Matthews, the science curriculum:

... is remarkable for its neglect of the conceptual structure of science. There is almost no indication that in learning science, children are learning something that is conceptually ordered and interrelated. As the outstanding features of modern science are its conceptual structure and the manner in which concepts ... are related across different fields of investigation, this gross neglect is astonishing.<sup>50</sup>

If one theme links the philosophies in this chapter it is perhaps the quite unrealistic picture of the child as largely capable of making his own choices, motivating himself, and constructing meaning for himself, at an age when greater adult guidance has traditionally been regarded as fundamental. Thus the child is the judge of what is relevant. The child is judged capable of learning at his own pace. Even asking the child to keep quiet, to sit still and concentrate, or to refrain from disrupting others, is less in evidence. In a sense, the child is in the driving seat as never before. In the words of two of our educationists: ‘people want to learn and can be trusted to pursue their own learning if it is what they perceive they need to know’.<sup>51</sup> While that may be largely true of adults, it constitutes a somewhat starry-eyed view of children – particularly boys.

In reality the child turns out not to be the *sole* judge of what is relevant. There is also a serious political agenda in our schools. Though all views and attitudes are equal, some turn out to be far more equal than others. For many educationists, the old ABC has turned into an agenda of Anti-Westernism, Business-Bashing and Cultural Safety.

## The Political Agenda

### **The Open Society and Its Enemies**

A few years ago a New Zealand educationist was speaking at a conference of the New Zealand Council for Teacher Education.<sup>1</sup> The educationist quoted Gandhi, who, when asked what he thought about Western civilisation, had joked that he ‘thought it would be a good idea’.<sup>2</sup> This pleasantry was apparently well received by his audience. As Australian academic Geoffrey Partington noted in his study of teacher education in New Zealand: ‘[Had the speaker] substituted ‘Maori’ for ‘Western’, what a reaction that would have received! Instead of roars of appreciative laughter, there would have been angry cries about racism, followed perhaps by demands for his dismissal’.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, had the speaker made the identical joke about ‘African’, ‘Oriental’ or virtually any other ‘civilisation’ there would also have been howls of protest. It may seem amazing that ‘educated’ people, who owe their very affluence, freedom and security to Western civilisation, should be so ignorant as to the origins of those things as to denigrate the very civilisation which produced them. It may seem shocking that many such people are part of our educational establishment, but it is true nonetheless.

Modern human rights and representative government are a rare and late development in the history of our species. They evolved in Western Europe and North America over a period of time going back to the seventeenth century, if not before. It is a story of revolutionary political events, and thinkers who increasingly argued that all people are entitled,

in some sense, to equal moral consideration on account of their dignity as individuals. These ideas are now gradually taking over the globe. Britain played as proud a role as any country in this story. The journey from feudalism and despotism to our modern open societies is an inspiring story.

There is a similarly inspiring story about living standards. Our contemporary standard of living is unparalleled in world history. Even a New Zealand welfare beneficiary enjoys an income several times higher than the poor in all countries two centuries ago. We owe our living standards to the industrial revolution – that seismic event in which an explosion of new technologies was harnessed to the task of making people more productive. The industrial revolution began in Britain.

It is a feature of Western civilisation that it tolerates groups strongly critical of open societies. Many intellectuals – particularly those in the social sciences – have been highly sympathetic to some form of Marxism. The views of the hard left have changed over the years, however. Karl Marx and his immediate followers believed in progress and in objective knowledge. They believed we could discover things about the world. They also believed capitalism at least represented a superior stage of development to feudalism. Their idea of a collectivist Utopia, imposed by a dictatorship of the ‘proletariat’, was always wildly implausible. It was shown increasingly to be pure fantasy by the poor performance of communist societies, followed by their total and ignominious collapse a decade ago.

Unfortunately, rather than absorb that lesson, admit their mistakes and embrace the open society, many on the hard left appear to have lost confidence altogether in Western civilisation and in the whole idea of progress. They have promoted vigorously the retreat from a belief in objective knowledge already noted as a feature of our times. In writings that are often as turgid to read as they are fantastic, they now tend to argue that ‘knowledge’ is simply a construct that reflects power relations or interests; that Western civilisation is inherently racist, sexist, imperialist or run in the interests of the ruling classes; and even that there is no inherent value in things left to us from the past.

The first objection one could make to such a position is to ask why, if objectivity and knowledge are illusions, there is any reason to take the analyses of these thinkers seriously. What makes their own particular viewpoint stand up? Have they not painted themselves into an intellectual corner? Moreover, such an exercise can be attempted only by turning selective amnesia into an art form. ‘Western society is sexist!’

Forget that women have achieved equal status in Western societies, but in very few others. ‘Western society is racist – it had slavery.’ Forget that slavery has been far from confined to Western society. Black Africans did not simply queue up obediently on Atlantic beaches, in neat rows, to enter the slave ships bound for America. Most of them were sold into slavery by other Africans.<sup>4</sup> Forget that it was Western civilisation that eventually abolished slavery. ‘Western society is imperialist!’ Forget that Western society has hardly been alone in this, and that the former colonial powers have long since allowed self-government in their colonies, frequently after introducing genuinely valuable institutions – as is surely the case with New Zealand.

### Cloud Cuckooland Incorporated

If such a feat of mental gymnastics can be achieved, one is then in a position to treat with an exaggerated respect the ‘victim’ groups, and above all indigenous races, while discreetly ignoring the less savoury aspects of their cultures. Read what one education professor writes:

It hardly needs stating that in Aotearoa New Zealand the relationship of the indigenous Maori towards technology and nature was not that of modern people and modern technology. It was not a challenge in Heidegger’s sense of standing-reserve, but was constituted by a much more symbiotic relationship revealed in such notions as a different drawing of the distinction between animate and inanimate, the intertwining of human beings and the environment, and hence of genealogy, and their conservation of resources.<sup>5</sup>

Heidegger was a very difficult German philosopher and a Nazi. This writer appears to be implying that pre-European Maori were better at conserving resources than modern Europeans. That is rather bizarre, given that pre-European Maori ate their way through every single species of moa – a resource certainly worth preserving. They also presided over the extermination of many other birds. Not that we should be too hard on Maori: there are many similar examples throughout history of mass extinctions brought about by hunter-gatherers.<sup>6</sup> The idea that such tribes had some inherent superiority in looking after the environment is preposterous.

It is true that this particular educationist does inhabit the more extreme corners of the education menagerie. He is one of those writers who distinguish between ‘critical literacy’ (good) and ‘functional literacy’

(mediocre at best). Functional literacy is the type that enables you to leave school and get a job working for a multi-national, without realising that you are being exploited by the class structure, or destroyers of the planet, or globalisation, or capitalism, or something decidedly sinister. As he puts it:

Functional literacy permits one to operate within a society but it tends not to provide a critical literacy which allows one to read into the edicts and requirements of how to function in society the underlying assumptions and power structures that constitute that society. Functional literacy tends then to disempower people.<sup>7</sup>

Another New Zealand educationist has written, with respect to science: ‘There is a need to struggle to assert the equal validity of Maori knowledge and frameworks and conversely to critically engage ideologies which reify Western knowledge as being superior, more scientific, and therefore more legitimate’.<sup>8</sup>

While these educationists may be at the more surreal end of the spectrum, more mainstream figures are also regular worshippers at the shrine of the indigenous race. The principal writer of the health sections of the health and physical education curriculum has welcomed the recent shift in health education from an ‘individualist’ view of health to a ‘holistic’ view, noting that ‘Maori conceptualisations of health are more holistic’. After briefly describing the Maori idea of hauora she declares: ‘clearly, such conceptualisations embody a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning, breadth and significance of health education than that which a predominant focus on the individual can provide’.<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that such people regularly deny by their own practice their tenets about the superiority or equal validity of indigenous ways. When our equal-validity-of-Maori-knowledge man wishes to travel to the South Island, how often does he gather together a group of friends and launch a waka? When our holism-in-health lady is not feeling well, how often does she consult a tohunga? Our tertiary institutions themselves, where such people typically dwell, are entirely Western phenomena.

### **‘Anti-Racism’ and ‘Anti-Sexism’**

Naturally there will be an insistence that school curricula be ‘anti-sexist’ and ‘anti-racist’. Thus, despite the national edict about tolerating

everybody's values, certain values turn out to be intolerable after all. Racism and sexism alone among the sins of this world are so bad as to be combated through the curriculum. An anti-racist, anti-sexist curriculum does not mean anything so harmless as children from all ethnic backgrounds and genders being treated with equal respect – something professional teachers have long been doing. At worst, it means putting across a view of Western society as inherently sexist (i.e. anti-women) and racist – at least compared to other societies. At best, it can involve a curious attempt to rewrite history. Thus the English curriculum declares that texts should include writing by or about Maori, and 'include and reflect the achievements, interests, and perspectives of girls, women, boys, and men'.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately most of the good English literature written to date has been produced by white males. Thus any attempt to achieve 'balance' in the curriculum risks sacrificing quality. It is characteristic of those wanting 'balance' that they sometimes end up contradicting themselves. If women and non-Europeans have indeed been oppressed groups in the past – which is the claim made – then almost by definition one would not expect to see those groups heavily represented among high achievers of the past. A history dominated by 'dead white males' is precisely what we would expect.

An 'anti-sexist' curriculum seems particularly heroic in these days when girls significantly outperform boys in schools, women hold numerous top positions in our government, and women surpass men in many (arguably most) social indicators. One feels that for a certain class of feminist, a truly non-sexist society will only be reached when women surpass men in *all* social indicators. Then she will have her revenge on the male sex. Meanwhile, much time is still devoted in colleges of education to gender issues. The ideological position of at least some college of education staff is indicated by the response given to a student at the Auckland College of Education who had just been married, and who asked to be called 'Mrs' in future. She was scornfully told by one academic that only women with low self-esteem who were dependent on men called themselves that.<sup>11</sup>

Another type of feminist will insist that men and women are the same biologically in all significant respects, and that all differences in behaviour are due to 'social conditioning' and other evil forces that must be counteracted by such enlightened policies as a 'non-sexist' curriculum. This type of feminist worries that few girls take subjects such as physics, and that boys do badly in English. 'If only there were not so many of those macho television advertisements showing the All Blacks in full

adrenalin flow,’ she thinks, ‘fewer boys would play that horribly violent game rugby, and would take up needlework and empathy-enhancement classes instead.’ Such thoughts fly in the face of nature. The ancestors of those boys used to hunt mammoth, while their womenfolk were engaged in the somewhat more peaceful activity of gathering fruit and vegetables.<sup>12</sup>

The different roles of the sexes in our evolutionary history should have led to differences in the male and female brains. Acknowledging differences does not mean abandoning in any way a fundamental moral equality between the sexes. What we should not expect to see is equal social outcomes between the sexes – in education or in any other area. It is unequal outcomes we should expect to see.

## **A Thought Experiment**

It would probably be unfair to paint most members of the New Zealand educational establishment as explicitly anti-Western. Most merely possess a wishy-washy cultural relativism, in which no culture is deemed superior to any other. That is bad enough. It means that British culture is placed on a par with pre-European Maori culture. Any concern for truth seems to have gone out the window.

If any reader bristles at the suggestion that British culture was superior to Maori at the time of colonisation, the author invites him to perform the following thought experiment. Imagine that when he dies he is to be reincarnated. Suppose he knows he will be re-born in the year 1769 – the year Captain Cook rediscovered New Zealand.<sup>13</sup> He is confronted with a real choice. He can choose to be born either into Maori society or British society at that time. He is allowed to find out facts about the two societies, and then must choose one society or the other. At the time of making the choice, he will know neither the personal characteristics he will possess in his second life, nor his position in society. These will be determined effectively by chance.<sup>14</sup> Thus he might be intelligent or stupid, strong or weak, man or woman, master or servant, chief or slave, eater or eatee. He knows only the general facts about the two societies.

In these circumstances virtually every non-Maori would surely choose to take their chances in eighteenth-century Britain. So would the great majority of those with Maori ancestry. The members of the educational establishment would be no different. I strongly suspect that even most Maori radicals would do the same, when the choice became real rather than simply a matter of rhetoric or posture. They would choose the greater

wealth, personal freedom, security and cultural richness of late-eighteenth-century Britain in preference to life in the Stone Age.

### **A Route to Disempowerment: Maori Science**

The cultural relativism pervading the educational establishment can lead to complete absurdities. Thus the science curriculum talks in all seriousness about acknowledging and valuing ‘Maori scientific knowledge’.<sup>15</sup> Yet the pre-European Maori had very little science – or at least nothing remotely comparable to modern science, with its vastly superior capacity to explain the world. How could they, given their tiny numbers, and stuck as they were in a pre-literate, pre-metallic culture in this very isolated corner of the globe? Though it may be interesting for an anthropologist to study how the pre-European Maori understood the physical world, for a *science* curriculum to go on about ‘Maori scientific knowledge’ is little short of scandalous. Moreover, it is hugely patronising to Maori. There are many aspects of Maori history and culture in which they can take pride, from the amazing sea voyages of their ancestors to Maori wood carving to the beauty of the Maori language. But they cannot take credit for having serious science any more than the British can take credit for inventing the haka.

Although we sometimes talk of ‘Western science’, that simply reflects the historical fact that modern science began in Western Europe in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In reality science is universal. As a national president of the Royal Society of New Zealand has stated in this very context, ‘The observations and laws are the same whether you live here or on the moon, in the northern or southern hemisphere, whether you are male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, black or white, Maori or Pakeha’.<sup>16</sup>

Scientific progress can be – and is – made today on all continents by all races. The post-war Japanese, Singaporeans and Koreans did not teach a special, local, ‘culturally-sensitive’ variety of science in their schools. They taught modern, ‘Western’ science. Had they not done so, we would not be buying so many of their products today.

Thus we do Maori children no favours if we suggest that there is Maori science, or that there is some special ‘Maori’ way of learning science. Nonetheless, Beverley Bell can write, with apparent approval, ‘The Treaty has been interpreted as providing opportunities for students to learn science in Te Reo Maori and enabling the science content to be learnt in the context of Maori beliefs, customs, traditions and ways of knowing’.<sup>17</sup>

As Michael Matthews has written ‘The Treaty of Waitangi is as irrelevant as a Vatican decree, or a resolution of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, to the question of whether or not particular cultural beliefs and frames of reference are compatible with either the findings, or the processes, of modern science’.<sup>18</sup> And as Geoffrey Partington has commented, ‘If you really wanted to “disempower” a group, that would be the way to set about it. Who needs enemies when they have such friends?’.<sup>19</sup>

### **Sensitivity or Ghettoising?**

There are a variety of assumptions concerning the teaching of Maori students for which evidence is rarely even asked, much less given. For instance it is government policy to encourage more Maori to become teachers, on the grounds that Maori students need role models from their own race and culture. Perhaps that policy is sound, at least so long as it does not involve significantly lowering entry standards to the teaching profession. Thomas Sowell, who has the annoying habit of asking for evidence when policies are adopted, sounds a note of warning. United States history from the late-nineteenth century onwards constitutes a huge kaleidoscope in which different ethnic groups have mixed in many varying proportions, often driven by successive waves of immigrants flooding in from Europe, Asia and elsewhere. Children in American schools have often been taught by people of their own race, religion and culture, but often they have not. According to Sowell:

... from all this vast experience, no one has yet produced evidence that ‘role models’ from the student’s own background are either necessary or sufficient, or in fact make any discernible academic difference at all.

The ‘role model’ dogma is pork barrel politics, masquerading as educational philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

A potentially more serious development is the current enthusiasm for bilingual education. An increasing number of Maori children are attending state-funded Maori schools where Maori is the main medium of instruction (Kura Kaupapa Maori schools). The Maori language is seen by the educational establishment as a taonga under the Treaty of Waitangi.<sup>21</sup> Maori immersion schools not only promote the Maori language. They are also seen as offering specifically Maori approaches to

learning. As so often, the wisdom of promoting these schools is simply assumed by almost everybody – or at least by everybody who wishes to escape being labelled a redneck or a racist. Research appears uncalled for.

Yet there are obvious questions about whether the Maori language contains enough fine distinctions to match English as a medium of instruction, and whether there really are any specifically Maori ways of learning that would assist Maori to succeed in a European world. Given the time spent in learning Maori, and the political pressures to lower entry standards for Maori-medium teachers, Maori immersion schools could end up further ghettoising Maori and widening any gaps.

The jury is still out on these questions, but personally I am doubtful. We are again following a recent American trend. For generations immigrants to America learnt English, and were absorbed into the common English-speaking culture. More recently, strident demands for bilingual education have been made for Hispanic immigrants – not by Hispanic parents themselves but by activists supposedly speaking on their behalf. Bilingual programmes have been introduced, first in Spanish then in other languages. Already a backlash appears to be developing in America. In 1998 the electors of California voted in a state-wide referendum to jettison bilingual education in their own state schools. Test scores of ‘limited English’ minority children have risen in the wake of that development. Not for the first time, we may be adopting an American idea just when that idea is on the wane at home.

### **The Treaty Guilt Trip – Compassion or Contortion?**

We have already seen evidence of the amazing lengths to which the Treaty has been stretched by the educational establishment. The text of the Treaty is not without its ambiguities.<sup>22</sup> However, it is a tribute to the elasticity of the human mind that a treaty signed in 1840, whose overall thrust – at least in the English version – was an assumption of sovereignty by the British Government over the whole of New Zealand, and the granting of all the rights *and duties* of British citizenship to Maori, should come back to haunt us today in so many ways. Rather than the Treaty ushering in a society in which all citizens are equal before the law, we are told that Maori should have certain rights simply by virtue of the fact that their ancestors arrived in these islands first. It is sometimes claimed that Maori bargained for these rights when signing the Treaty.<sup>23</sup> If that is so, then in reality there was no substantive agreement, because

it is scarcely conceivable the British of 1840 would have read the English version in that manner. Even had they done so, there are still serious questions about whether different laws for different races could be justified as a permanent part of our constitution. Nonetheless, the vague idea that the Treaty involves some type of special ‘partnership’, and that New Zealand is a ‘bi-cultural’ nation, has taken hold in recent years – though the precise nature of this partnership is rarely spelled out clearly because it is virtually impossible to do so.

It is hardly to be expected that our educational establishment would remain immune from this climate of woolly thinking and self-laceration. As Michael Irwin, formerly advisor to the Education Forum, puts it: ‘for many educationalists veneration of the Treaty seems to be a compulsory and competitive limbo dance involving much contortion and bending backwards’.<sup>24</sup> He is not joking. References to the importance of the Treaty turn up everywhere.

For instance, the Auckland College of Education calendar contains a lengthy section on the Treaty.<sup>25</sup> We are informed that it is college policy ‘to honour the Treaty of Waitangi by actions in our employment of staff, selection of students and the development and delivery of programmes and services’. That statement hardly reassures those critics, such as Phil Raffills, who believe the college does not select students purely on merit, but rather favours those from certain backgrounds. We are told in the course of the statement that the Treaty is ‘integral to the achievement of excellence and quality in the development of our graduates’; that the college ‘acknowledges the Mana Motuhake [inherent rights of Tangata Whenua] of Maori’; and that the college ‘recognises the need for Maori to have the opportunities to pursue the development of Maori approaches to teaching, learning, research and administration’.

In the social studies curriculum we are told that students will ‘understand the nature of biculturalism and the partnership between Maori and Pakeha’.<sup>26</sup> Thus children are somehow to understand concepts the nature of which no two adults seem to be able to agree upon. Moreover, they are to be force-fed a view that many voting, taxpaying New Zealanders believe is plain wrong. So much for the open inquiry professed by the curriculum.

The educational establishment may seem to twist the Treaty a long way in construing its support for initiatives such as Maori immersion schools. However, there is one reading of the Treaty they never make. We never see them claiming that the Treaty gives Maori parents the right to take the money spent by the government on their child’s behalf

and use it to purchase an education of their choice in either the public or private sector. Such a policy of school choice would empower Maori parents directly. But there is one policy the educational establishment hate even more than they love expanding the scope of the Treaty – school choice. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, they are convinced that ‘the experts’ know best.

It can only be guilt over colonisation which leads the educational establishment to read so much into the Treaty. This guilt is misplaced. It would be impossible to argue that any individual Maori living today had been made worse off as a result of colonisation, for the simple reason that no individual Maori living today would exist in the absence of colonisation, since, among other things, virtually all Maori have mixed ancestry. Despite the New Zealand wars and land confiscations that followed, it would be almost as difficult to argue that in 2002 ‘Maori in general’ are worse off as a result of colonisation and the introduction of British culture to New Zealand. Of course those nineteenth-century Maori who died from Western diseases, and who met other misfortunes stemming from colonisation, did obviously suffer from European contact – often severely. But their lives are now over. We cannot help people who died a century ago, and it is scarcely rational for European New Zealanders to feel guilty about them.

Excessive focus on the Treaty risks obscuring the obvious fact that there are other ethnic minorities in New Zealand with similar social statistics to Maori. Moreover, in the course of human history racial groups have frequently achieved economic success in the face of adversity, discrimination and sometimes outright persecution.<sup>27</sup> Immigrants have often fallen into this category. The Jews are an obvious example, but there are many others such as the Lebanese in Africa, and Indians and ethnic Chinese in numerous parts of the world. Sometimes minority groups are more successful than groups possessing legal privileges. Evidently there are many more factors influencing social outcomes than simply the loss of land by one’s ancestors five generations ago.

### **The Demonisation of ‘the New Right’**

The general political stance of the educational establishment comes across in many ways. Educationists write sentences such as ‘Teachers need to be more vigilant and firm than ever as the slow tide of New Right policies gradually erodes the democratic foundations which education in New Zealand is founded upon’.<sup>28</sup> And you thought we lived in a democracy.

Some educationists even write sentences such as ‘The problem faced by working people in New Zealand is not the neo-liberal ideology of the Treasury but how to advance a movement which can oppose the policies of the State, and finally put state power into the hands of the great majority’,<sup>29</sup> You were *sure* we lived in a democracy.

Without question the educational establishment is less sympathetic towards private enterprise and markets than New Zealanders in general. In college of education and university education courses students are frequently given writings that excoriate the post-1984 economic reforms in New Zealand. Students are rarely given the chance to read the views of the leading market liberal thinkers themselves.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is so common for left-wing educationists to misrepresent the views of the other side as to almost seem a mandatory requirement.

To give just one example, Keith Ballard, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Otago, has written:

It was Margaret Thatcher who said there is no such thing as society, only individuals. From that idea we cease to be citizens and we cease to be members of a community. Instead we are simply consumers and providers contracting with one another for our needs and wants, our goods and services. What we owe to one another is that which can be written down in a contract and paid for. It has to be written down because the New Right philosophy is that we are all competing individuals motivated by what is best for ourselves and, therefore, not to be trusted. In the workplace we tick off our accountability on endless checklists. There is little room for notions of love and care and community support in this model of society.<sup>31</sup>

There is more than one misconception in this tangled passage, but let us first concentrate on what Lady Thatcher is alleged to believe. Thatcher did once tell an interviewer, in an unfortunate choice of words, that ‘there is no such thing as society’. The point she was making at the time was that, in her view, people too often looked to the government for support rather than first providing for themselves. She immediately went on to say: ‘There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It’s our duty to look after ourselves and then to look after our neighbour’.<sup>32</sup>

How a politician who talked explicitly about our duty to look after our neighbour could possibly correspond to the caricature offered up by Ballard is very hard to see. Obviously Thatcher does believe in community

or society, in the sense of a network of relationships in which we all share. As she later wrote in her political memoirs, society was ‘not an abstraction, separate from the men and women who composed it, but a living structure of individuals, families, neighbours and voluntary associations’.<sup>33</sup>

One might expect an overexcited political groupie, during a public meeting, to shout out from the back of the hall ‘You know, Thatcher said there is no such thing as society!’, but one does not expect a supposedly scholarly university academic to perpetuate such a hoary old myth. Or rather, one does – sadly, it happens all the time.

The quoted passage also strongly implies that in market liberal philosophy generally there is little or no room for benevolence. Such an accusation is constantly made by the educational establishment. Yet virtually every important market liberal thinker,<sup>34</sup> and every key player in New Zealand’s own economic reforms, has believed that people do, and should, have benevolent motivations. No wonder the writings of ‘the New Right’ are rarely given directly to college of education students.

## **Genes: The Denial of the Obvious**

Another aspect of ideological bias among the educational establishment is the tendency to play down or deny altogether the genetic component of intelligence and other attributes. Thus two New Zealand educationists can write: ‘intelligence is not innate, limited or fixed’.<sup>35</sup>

To many on the left it is an article of faith that ‘society’ is responsible for most of the inequalities that we see around us. ‘Faith’ is the operative word. Thus if little Johnny seems stupid, that must be because his parents have not given him enough intellectual stimulation, or are too poor to do so. That means the government is not investing enough resources in helping little Johnny’s parents. Parents do make some difference. However, we also know that little Johnny’s genes are extremely important. It is very unlikely that lavishing vast amounts of resources on a child of average ability will turn that child into a world beater.

We know that there is considerable genetic variation in people’s capacities, tastes and personal characteristics. Some fascinating studies involving identical twins separated at birth bear this out. If two people with identical genes are given very different upbringings, yet still turn out to be very similar in their personalities, that is a strong argument for genes over environment. My favourite example concerns identical twins separated at birth, one of whom was raised as a Jew and the other as a

Nazi. They had scarcely met before they were brought together for a twins study, 25 years after last seeing each other. When they did meet, their appearance was uncannily similar. Moreover, ‘Jack and Oskar were full of quirky habits in common, such as storing rubber bands on their wrists, reading magazines from back to front, flushing the toilet before using it, and dipping buttered toast in their coffee. They also enjoyed startling people by sneezing in crowded places’.<sup>36</sup>

We are fairly certain that intellectual capability is inherited: bright people will tend to have bright children, though environment also comes into it. We also know bright people tend to have high socioeconomic status, though there are many exceptions.<sup>37</sup> Thus purely on the basis of their genetic inheritance, children in middle-class schools will perform better on average than children in working-class schools – quite apart from any economic and social differences. Some inequality of outcomes is inevitable.

Some educationists, however, see any inequality at all between schools as a sign that society is unfair, or that the economic system is based on exploitation, and that we need a radically different society – typically one with a much bigger government if not a collectivist Utopia.

One suggestion definitely off-limits in polite society is that there might be a genetic basis to the educational disparities between races in New Zealand. The universal assumption among the educational establishment is that inferior school performance among Maori is due entirely to a variety of ‘environmental’ factors such as family upbringing. They may well be right – but it is an assumption, not yet a scientific finding. The jury is still out on that particular question.

Intelligence testing has been hugely controversial in New Zealand, as elsewhere. In former times tests were used quite extensively in our schools for the purposes of streaming by ability. Since the tests showed differences in average performance amongst social and racial groups, they were often condemned as biased and unscientific. One educationist wrote: ‘standardised tests like Tosca ... are an essential part of the very apparatus through which social and cultural inequalities are sustained’.<sup>38</sup>

However, some very serious scholars claim that intelligence tests do capture a real phenomenon *and* that there is probably a genetic component to the average differences in measured ‘intelligence’ between races. American sociologist Charles Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein, a psychologist, argued precisely that in their book *The Bell Curve*. Moreover the fact that much of the ‘scholarly’ reaction to *The Bell Curve* was so palpably hysterical only raised suspicions among lay people that a raw

nerve might have been struck. If Herrnstein and Murray are correct, Maori school achievement may never match that of European New Zealanders, who in turn may forever trail ethnic Chinese New Zealanders.

My purpose is not to take sides on this particular issue, but simply to point out that intellectual honesty requires us to keep an open mind. The personal vitriol heaped on Herrnstein and Murray, and on others expressing similar views, hardly constitutes encouragement for anyone in this country to enter the race-and-intelligence debate. But it is pointless attempting to stop the march of science. In Murray's view: 'Within the next 20 or 30 years, we're going to know the whole genetic story about IQ. It can't be held back. What we need to start saying now is that we can look at all these facts squarely in the face and not run screaming from the room'.<sup>39</sup>

The establishment of a genetic link between race and school performance would not, in the end, be such a terrible discovery – except perhaps for those members of the chattering classes who currently so stridently deny it. It is crucial to appreciate that the debate is only about *averages*. Lower average 'intelligence' among Maori, for instance, would not be an argument that Maori are not able to study science, English literature, or anything else. We already know that to be nonsense. Nor would it detract in any way from one's moral obligation to treat members of all ethnic groups on their merits as individuals.

## The Obsession with Equal Outcomes

Members of the educational establishment are constantly using words such as 'unequal' and 'inequality'. According to one educationist: 'there may be *no* ready answers to widespread educational failure so long as we have such an unequal society' [*italics in the original*].<sup>40</sup>

Such writers rarely say explicitly what they mean by 'unequal' – whether they seek greater equality of outcomes or simply greater equality of opportunity. However, it is apparent that most seek more equal outcomes, in education and in society generally.

The problem with seeking more equal outcomes in education, when children vary so widely in their abilities and backgrounds, is that it can too easily involve penalising the high achievers. When it does, it becomes social engineering at its most obnoxious. It is not only unfair on the more academic students. It also harms the less academic, since they too gain from living in a society in which the able are allowed to develop their talents.

Attempts to equalise outcomes in education rarely fool the children themselves. In any class the children all know who are the best at mathematics, who are the best readers, who can run the fastest, and who can hold a tune. They will continue to establish their own hierarchies, irrespective of what adults do.

Recently our whole system of post-compulsory assessment was hijacked by a levelling ideology. The prime mover in the drive to impose unit standards throughout the school curricula was David Hood, who is explicitly opposed to ranking students against one another.<sup>41</sup> Though unit standards have now become achievement standards for conventional subjects, the official ideology remains that students compete against ‘the standard’ rather than against each other.<sup>42</sup> We are still living with the results of that serious misjudgement of human nature.

Though he perhaps overstates his case, journalist Frank Haden has correctly drawn attention to the fundamentally political nature of the drive to equalise outcomes in schools:

No pupil can be allowed to feel his or her achievement is unsatisfactory and others have done better .... This bizarre creed gives all pupils the wrong idea. It tells the bright ones there is no point in putting in a top performance because it won't be recognised. Worse, it tells the less bright that their efforts are just as valuable as the achievements of the smarties, so they can expect equal pay for all when they apply for jobs.

The social engineers who call the shots at the top in the education system see this as a desirable outcome. They mumble about ‘values’ and see the awarding of equivalent praise to smarties and dummies as a declaration that every citizen is equally worthy, that all have equal claim on the good things in life, and that the only proper government is one that redistributes income and opportunities in one way or another, closing the gaps until, by God, everyone jolly well has equal shares.<sup>43</sup>

The only problem with this position is that ‘it has nothing to do with reality’.<sup>44</sup>

We have reached the end of our attempt to make sense of the philosophies that are gradually invading New Zealand schools. A brief recapitulation may be in order. In Chapter 2 we identified and described a retreat from the transmission of knowledge in our schools. Closely related to that trend were the follies catalogued in Chapter 3. Teachers were discovered to be giving up their core responsibility of teaching for

touchy-feely new roles as ‘facilitators’, amateur psychologists and social workers – whether it be in their attempts to instill ‘self-esteem’ in pupils or in their overemphasis on modish nostrums such as ‘creativity’. Teachers were also leaving children much more to their own devices than in the past.

In the present chapter we have seen how the retreat from knowledge has also been driven by a political and ideological agenda. If you do not greatly value Western civilisation, you may be relaxed about the introduction of topics of peripheral worth into our classrooms. You may not mind the pretence that there is such a thing as ‘Maori science’, or the emphasis on gender issues if it shows our history in a sufficiently bad light. If you have a distorted picture of markets or Western institutions, you will transmit that bias into the classroom. If your assumption is that most differences among children are due to ‘society’ rather than innate characteristics, you may well support educational policies that attempt to even out those differences. In the process, it will be hard to avoid making classrooms even further removed from places of serious learning.

## Epilogue – Widening the Gaps

To the extent that schools retreat from the serious business of passing on knowledge and skills, it is the children from disadvantaged home backgrounds who most miss out. To some degree middle-class parents make up for the deficiencies of a school. They help with their child's reading, perhaps give phonics instruction on the sly, assist with simple mathematics, take their children to the theatre, and generally introduce them to wider cultural horizons. The former secondary school headmaster mentioned earlier found himself in a primary classroom one day talking to a small boy during a maths lesson. The conversation went as follows:

“Do you know your times table?”

“Oh yes, I've got it up to the twelve times table.” And he had.

“How did you learn them?”

“When Mum and I did the dishes.”

“Are you telling me the teacher has not gone over those?”

“Oh no. We have never done any tables at school.”

Needless to say, not all children have such a backstop.



## PART 3

# CURRICULUM CATASTROPHIES



# Introduction

There is a case for not having a national curriculum at all. One can argue that it is absolutely no business of government to set down what should be taught in every school in the country. Why not allow individual schools to set their own curricula, and allow parents to choose schools? Why not let a hundred flowers bloom rather than have a political tussle over reaching a unique solution, which is then imposed on all? Following this view, schools should not be allowed to misrepresent to parents the nature of their courses; a school should not be able to teach ‘creation science’ and call it biology. Ultimately, however, school curricula would be a matter that concerned only schools, parents, and the pupils themselves.

I have some sympathy with such a view. But we do have a national curriculum and it is our current unhappy task to assess its adequacy. Indeed we recently completed a cycle in which a set of new curricula were developed. The natural place to begin is with the document setting out the curriculum framework.<sup>1</sup>

## **Framework or Straightjacket?**

Certain elements of the framework are predictable enough – the political correctness, the liberal use of Maori, and the standard pieties about the social role of schooling and about how we live in a changing world. Other features are more ominous.

First of all, among two pages of principles,<sup>2</sup> we find, as Michael Irwin puts it: ‘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. This is a quite astonishing and deplorable omission in a national curriculum’.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the same detailed curriculum structure is imposed on all subjects, from physical education to physics. The idea that different

types of learning might need different types of curricula seems to have escaped the architects of the framework.

Third, a strange section on ‘essential skills’ suggests a failure to appreciate some quite fundamental distinctions.<sup>4</sup> All manner of ‘skills’ are placed on the same level, from ‘higher-order’ skills such as thinking logically and analysing problems to much more mechanical skills such as learning to use tools efficiently. There are ‘social and cooperative skills’ such as developing good relationships with others. Even developing self-esteem is down as a ‘skill’. It is almost as though one develops self-esteem through the twice-daily performance of an exercise involving a mirror and a set of compliments. Taken at face value, lumping all of these very different aspects of schooling together as ‘skills’ betrays considerable confusion of thought. A similar failure to distinguish different types of learning was partly responsible for the disastrous drive to impose unit standards throughout the school curriculum and even beyond the school gates – a saga discussed in Chapter 8.

The prominence of ‘skills’ evidently reflects the current fashion for elevating skills over knowledge. Moreover, the framework is quite explicit that all of the skills are to be developed over all of the so-called ‘essential learning areas’. One might have imagined that there was comparatively little scope to develop social and cooperative skills in the course of learning, say, algebra. The writers of the framework think they know better.

Fourth, there is no specification of a core of knowledge considered more fundamental than other types of knowledge. The closest we come is that Form Five students must take English or Maori, mathematics, and a science. Unless one is hopelessly in thrall to the Treaty, it is difficult to justify Maori’s inclusion on such a list at the expense of any other minority language such as Samoan or Mandarin.

Fifth, for each subject eight ‘levels’ are prescribed, with absolutely no reason given as to why all subjects over 13 years of schooling should be segmented in this particular way.

Sixth, the framework document enjoins schools to ‘understand and make use of the connections between the learning areas’.<sup>5</sup> This can include the employment of a ‘topic or thematic’ approach.<sup>6</sup> These statements reflect the modish idea that there is a ‘seamless web of knowledge’, and that learning should as much as possible be integrated across the various subjects. Thus the framework gives every encouragement to the primary school which reportedly teaches ‘breakfasts’ [sic] as an integrated topic, in which mathematical, language,

social and scientific skills are supposedly all developed through the approved group-inquiry methods.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps there is an intermediate school somewhere whose pupils learn lunches through a topic-based curriculum, and a high school where they learn whole three-course dinners.

Finally, the curriculum applies to all students, irrespective of ability or inclinations. Since most schools do not stream students by ability, and since there is no provision for different courses based on ability, children of very different capacities will often end up in the same classroom. That is presumably why the framework states that: ‘In any one class, students may be working at a range of levels, both in the different learning areas, and within a single learning area. They will work at their own rate while being encouraged to strive for higher goals’.<sup>8</sup>

This evidently implies a fairly heroic role for the teacher-as-facilitator – rushing from group to group, or from individual to individual, monitoring each child’s progress and giving each child help where required. The heroic nature of the task is indicated by the British talking of a ‘seven-year gap’ opening up between the brightest and slowest students by age 11 (i.e., what the average child can do at that age, some will not be able to do until 14, and some have already done at 7).<sup>9</sup> In a mixed-ability class there will be a Mary who reads quite sophisticated novels and a Johnny who can scarcely read at all (or to put it in more contemporary terms, a child who is already cooking a three-course meal with wine and a child who is still burning the toast). Being a facilitator in such a class, particularly if they are unruly boys, will be no easy task.

## **Fog Warning – the Achievement Objectives**

The framework asserts that the individual curriculum statements ‘are sufficiently specific to provide students, teachers, parents, and communities with clear information about what is to be learned and achieved during the years of schooling’.<sup>10</sup> Such a claim cannot be sustained. Many of the curricula are incurably vague. Part of the problem is that the curricula represent an unfortunate shift in philosophy towards attempting to specify ‘learning outcomes’. The traditional, ‘syllabus’ approach to curricula had concentrated on what students should be taught or expected to learn. That approach is still dominant in countries with successful education systems. Our new curricula instead attempt to concentrate on what students can actually do or achieve. Thus each subject is divided into ‘strands’, and for every strand ‘achievement objectives’ are set out for each of the eight levels.

Yet the promised ‘clear learning outcomes’ regularly elude us.<sup>11</sup> Let us consider the most important curriculum statement, English. To avoid any suspicion that I am deliberately selecting the silliest or most badly-written set of achievement objectives, let us take the very first set appearing in the statement – those under the activity ‘interpersonal listening’.<sup>12</sup> Level 1 is:

listen and respond to others.

Presumably anything that is not totally inert can pass that particular test easily. A dog can listen and respond to others. Level 2 is:

listen to and interact with others in a group or class discussion.

It is never too early to start working on those social and cooperative skills. But what counts as ‘interaction’, and how does one fail to interact? Level 3 is:

listen to and interact with others to clarify understanding in a group or class discussion.

The question is, what counts as clarifying understanding? If the test is a stiff one, some poor children will seldom or never clarify understanding in a group discussion. It seems we need to clarify our understanding of this point. Level 4 is:

listen to and interact with others to clarify understanding of narrative, information, ideas, and opinions, and to contribute to discussion, in one-to-one, small group, and class discussion.

We are still no nearer to defining a clear learning outcome. Level 5 adds a word with even more fudge attached:

listen to and interact *appropriately* with others to clarify understanding of narrative, information, ideas, and opinions, and to support discussion in different situations [*italics added*].

‘Appropriately’ is a pure weasel word. Politicians often reach for that particular word when they have nothing to say, cannot agree about what should be said, or for some reason wish to say nothing at all. In this case, what counts as interacting appropriately? And what counts as

inappropriate? Is having an irritating laugh inappropriate? Is expressing the view that men make better composers than women inappropriate? Is being dressed as a Zulu warrior inappropriate? Is wearing long earrings inappropriate?

By the time we get to level 8 we have:

listen as active participants, interpreting and responding to narrative, information, ideas, and opinions, and initiating, sustaining, encouraging, and promoting discussion in a wide range of situations and for different purposes.

We are still no closer to a clear learning outcome. In one sense, bright 10-year-olds all manage to achieve level 8. If so, the words have totally failed to describe what 17-year-olds are supposed to have learnt after all those years in school.

Not all the achievement objectives in the curriculum documents are as pathetic as the set just quoted. However, the Education Review Office is surely correct in complaining that:

New Zealand's national curriculum is permissive and does not clearly define the state's expectations of quality and other standards essential to informed classroom teaching, informed teacher education and pedagogical training, and effective strategic planning and self review by schools.<sup>13</sup>

To be fair to the writers of the curricula, in attempting to specify 'clear learning outcomes' they were chasing a will-o-the-wisp. This will become apparent when we examine the unit standards saga.

Overall the individual curriculum statements are poor. Some are merely disappointing while others are so bad they should be accompanied by a government health warning. No document is worse than the social studies curriculum.

## Social Studies – A Sea of Pink Fluff

### **Let's Hear it for the Communists**

'Social studies' teaching in New Zealand schools has long been a minor scandal. It is a subject under whose umbrella half-truths, quarter-truths and sometimes just plain moonshine have too often been peddled to unsuspecting children. There are no prizes for guessing which side of the political fence the half-truths have tended to come from. I recall studying the Soviet Union in secondary school social studies back in the mid-1970s. The general impression received was that the Soviet Union had a very different political system to New Zealand, but not necessarily an inferior one. This was at a time when the main facts about the Soviet Union were freely available, when every adult not permanently lame-brained knew the Soviet system to be as oppressive as it was impoverishing, and knew that they could not remotely want such a system here, for themselves or for their children. Such teaching made young people more likely to emerge from school believing in a 'moral equivalence' between the Soviet Union and Western powers such as the United States. Back in the days of the Cold War, this was a high-stakes debate.

In school social studies we learnt much more about the dark side of life in Victorian England than about the dark side of life in the Soviet Union. All those poor factory workers, toiling incredibly long hours for a mere pittance, crowded umpteen to a room, suffering from the unbridled capitalism of the industrial revolution! Only years later did I come to a more balanced understanding of the nineteenth century – that despite

its many faults, Victorian England still represented one of the freest, fairest and most prosperous societies in history up to that point; that there is no evidence of workers' real incomes falling during the early industrial revolution and considerable evidence that by the middle of the nineteenth century their incomes were rising at an unprecedented rate;<sup>1</sup> and that the nineteenth century was a period of great progress and optimism. Sadly, most people simply retain for life the caricature absorbed at school.

The general impression from studying 'Samoan villages' in school social studies was that Western Samoans lived a pleasant, laid-back 'communal' life that compared, if anything, rather well with life here. The question as to why so many Samoans were voting with their feet and coming to live in Auckland, in preference to life in the island paradise, was never addressed.

Far worse examples of slanted teaching must surely have occurred over the years. Agnes-Mary Brooke discovered a history teacher disseminating material to his class that constituted one long paean of praise to the Chinese Communist Revolution and to Mao Tse-tung.<sup>2</sup> The material had headings of such scholarly objectivity as 'Mao is the greatest' and 'Let's hear it for the communists'.

## **A Slide-Show by a Demented Projectionist**

Social studies has never managed to transcend its basic problem – that it is a bits-and-pieces subject with no focus and no rigour. An impressionistic smorgasbord of topics is paraded before the pupils. They do not learn proper history, proper geography, or proper anything else. They do not learn anything much, because there is actually no such subject as 'social studies': it is simply a vehicle for whatever takes an educator's fancy.

Thus before opening a contemporary social studies curriculum one remembers to take a deep breath and brace oneself for the worst. Nonetheless, a heavy dose of the smelling salts may be required as it becomes apparent to the reader how much our Western heritage has been written out of the plot.

The current social studies curriculum went through two revisions. The first draft, written in enormously wordy edu-babble, contained suggested 'learning activities' as challenging as 'Draw a cartoon to illustrate the problems a person moving from a rural to an urban situation, in New Zealand or overseas, might face when seeking employment'.<sup>3</sup>

Such an activity was suggested not for primary school children but for level 8 students – people who drive motor vehicles, shave and put on make-up.

In the face of vigorous objections from various quarters at the sheer awfulness of this document, a slightly revised draft was issued. After almost equally vigorous objections a final version, whose main mercy is that it was much shorter than the first version, was produced. The suggested learning activities had thankfully been dropped.

The present curriculum continues the trend of social studies being simply a mish-mash of topics with no real thread or coherence. The five strands contain bits and pieces of ‘geography’, ‘history’, ‘economics’, environmental issues, culture, and various other topics vaguely connected with people and the social sciences. To the framers of the document, social studies is about studying ‘an integrated body of content’.<sup>4</sup> But while the curriculum looks orderly and integrated, its contents are chaos. The ‘history’ strand is pretentiously titled ‘time, continuity and change’. Yet for a strand supposedly about continuity, it is remarkably discontinuous. As Reginald Lockstone has written, ‘the pupil has no idea of history as occurring in time. What he gets in this “strand” is more like a slide-show given by a demented projectionist’.<sup>5</sup>

The student will learn almost no real history. As for geography, Geoffrey Partington wrote of the first draft that students following it ‘bid fair to being more ignorant geographically than any generation in New Zealand since compulsory education began’.<sup>6</sup> It did not get much better in the subsequent drafts.

Despite the curriculum giving no evidence of any serious knowledge or analytical principles being acquired by the students, they are nonetheless presumed to know enough to pass judgement on a huge range of social and political issues that most adults find dauntingly complicated. Three so-called ‘processes’ permeate the curriculum, one of which is ‘social decision making’. Even five-year-old children are supposed to ‘make decisions about possible social action’.<sup>7</sup> The mind boggles as to the decisions children who cannot yet read, or who know almost nothing about the world, could possibly make. By level 8, of course, they are solving all the world’s problems.

Once again Thomas Sowell has timely words of warning:

Those who emphasise the teaching of ‘issues’ rather than academic skills fail to understand that ‘issues’ are infinitely more complex and difficult to master than fundamental principles of analysis. The very reason why there is an issue in the first place is usually because

no single principle can possibly resolve the differences to the mutual satisfaction of those concerned. ... To teach issues instead of intellectual principles to school children is like teaching calculus to people who have not yet learned arithmetic, or surgery to people lacking the rudiments of anatomy or hygiene. Worse, it is teaching them to go ahead and perform surgery, without worrying about boring details.<sup>8</sup>

## The Obsession with Dividing the Cake

Sure enough, there is a troubling tendency in the curriculum to assume implicitly that certain concepts or issues are unproblematic, and that all informed people are agreed on what they mean. Thus at one point students are expected to demonstrate understanding of ‘how and why people seek to gain and maintain social justice and human rights’.<sup>9</sup> Both these concepts have long constituted a battleground for competing philosophies. Some people sincerely believe that achieving greater social justice in New Zealand requires bigger government, more welfare spending and higher taxation. Others sincerely believe it requires smaller government and more use of market forces. ‘Human rights’ is an equally contested phrase. Should human rights be largely limited to the classical liberties established long ago, such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and so on? Or should they involve unconditional rights *to* certain goods, such as a right to a tertiary education? To the extent that these issues are raised at all in schools, it would be scandalous if young people were given just one view.

As it happens, the term ‘social justice’ tends to be employed much more frequently by the political left than by the political right. Moreover, the crude presentation of economics in the strand ‘resources and economic activities’ only deepens suspicion that the left-wing version of ‘social justice’ will predominate in classrooms. In this strand the emphasis is overwhelmingly on how resources should be distributed among various claimants. Nobody would deny that distribution issues are worthy of study, but the impression given by the curriculum is that resources are largely static. If that is the case, the main issue can easily become how those resources should be shared most fairly.

Certain key ideas simply go unmentioned:

- the concept of economic growth, which appears neither among the list of concepts underlying the strand nor anywhere in the strand itself;<sup>10</sup>

- any notion that technological progress might enable us to use resources more productively;
- any idea, fundamental to mainstream economics, that when an exchange takes place voluntarily, both parties to that exchange are expecting to gain by it – that value is in some sense being created.

We should not forget that for the whole of history, economic growth was painfully slow when it was not actually non-existent. That is why in the year 1800 most people were still so very poor. However, around that time – just 200 years ago – certain countries began to grow far more rapidly than in the past. They have not stopped growing since, and growth has spread to encompass most of the world. In a sense, since the industrial revolution we have learnt as a society how to *create* resources, and living standards are immeasurably higher as a result. The curriculum shows an unconscionable lack of recognition of that fact, and of the very concept of creating wealth rather than simply redistributing it.

### **‘Whatever You Say, Don’t Mention the West!’**

Another of the three ‘processes’ underlying the curriculum is ‘values exploration’.<sup>11</sup> Though the wording is typically vague, the emphasis does seem more on accepting other people’s values than on counteracting moral error, unless of course those errors are certain discriminatory practices that it is fashionable to drive out with bell, book and candle: i.e., racism and sexism. But acceptance of differences is certainly not found in all societies. One of the many contradictions in the curriculum document is pointed out by Geoffrey Partington:

If we support the right of individuals to hold different values and beliefs, we must then in logic have a higher regard, all other things being equal, for societies in which there is considerable freedom to hold different values and beliefs ... open, pluralist or liberal societies should be valued more highly than closed or authoritarian societies, including both tribal societies and modern totalitarian societies.<sup>12</sup>

However, we search the curriculum in vain of any acknowledgment that Western societies do have this advantage, or indeed any other.

Nobody reading the curriculum would gain the slightest inkling that:

- our parliamentary democracy came from Britain;
- our legal system came from Britain;
- most of our liberties came from Britain;
- our rule of law came from Britain;
- most of our population came from Britain;
- a huge slice of our culture came from Britain – from the language we all speak to the sports we enjoy;
- much of the rest of our culture came from elsewhere in Western Europe and from America.

Instead there is a grovelling prostration towards anything Maori. There is even the extraordinary stipulation that when incorporating ‘Maori perspectives’ in social studies programmes, teachers should ‘endeavour to ensure that the perspectives are in accordance with the views of iwi kainga and tangata whenua’.<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, no other group wields a right of veto over what is taught about them in social studies, or in any other subject. Teachers are not required to check with the Returned Services Association (RSA) over what is taught about the Second World War, or with Anglican bishops about what is said on religion, or with long-established European families about teachings on colonisation. Any such suggestion would rightly be met with derision. However, nothing unsanitised about Maori must be taught.

Another incongruity in the curriculum is the requirement to: ‘develop learning experiences that encourage students to explore *and value* both traditional and non-traditional gender roles and the contribution and status of both women and men in different cultures, places and times’ [italics added].<sup>14</sup>

At this point one almost begins to feel sorry for the politically correct teacher trying to make honest sense out of this document. Is it not slightly sexist to value suttee – the Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre? Would not such an attitude be taking broad-mindedness just a trifle too far? Or closer to home, should the teacher be valuing the traditional Maori practice of not allowing women to speak on a marae? The teacher is certainly enjoined to deliver ‘non-

sexist’ social studies. But he is given no guidance when two of the dogmas flatly contradict one another.

## **A Deeply Unrepresentative Set of People**

It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which our British and Western heritage is neglected in this curriculum. In the very first draft, in a section on cross-strand perspectives, the document moved from New Zealand to the Pacific to Asia, then straight to ‘the global community’ with no sub-section on Britain or Europe.<sup>15</sup> Then the second draft emerged. In the words of Kenneth Minogue, the distinguished New Zealand-born political philosopher:

The revised draft gave further evidence of the hidden dynamics of this remarkable project by including Europe but in no way distinguishing Britain.<sup>16</sup> Why this extraordinary blindness to the most important heritage of all in a document devoted to piety about heritages? ...

This is so gross an omission that it is proof positive that this document is an attempt to advance specific political interests, and those interests would certainly be at odds with the inclinations of very large numbers of New Zealanders. Now this is a very serious matter. It means that the Ministry of Education has become the instrument of back stairs intrigue, taken over by a deeply unrepresentative set of people who are seeking, through the apparently merely educational concerns of teaching children about the world, to change the entire direction of the country, in a covert fashion.<sup>17</sup>

On the evidence of either draft, it is very hard to disagree with this verdict. In the final version the British Isles does creep into that section with one lonely mention, though it remains very much on a par with other places.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile we lose the one sentence that had almost stated that our legal system and parliamentary democracy are of European origin.<sup>19</sup> Overall one can only concur with Kenneth Minogue’s conclusion:

Academically speaking, [the curriculum] 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. And above all it is a political wolf in educational sheep’s clothing.<sup>20</sup>

## Science – Overdose of ‘Relevance’ Kills Rigour

### Some Basic Confusions

The very first sentence of the science curriculum gets us off to a wobbly start:

Science involves people investigating the living, physical, material, and technological components of their environment and making sense of them in logical and creative ways.<sup>1</sup>

On this account, many poets are scientists. Take, for instance, the charming lyric by William Wordsworth that begins:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er dales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host of golden daffodils.

This poem would seem to investigate the living world, and make sense of it in a creative and logical way (it has a logical sequence of ideas, for instance). But it is not science. (It gives rise to the subversive thought that perhaps our science curriculum lets decent poetry back into our schools through the back door. After all, the poem about daffodils would rarely be seen in English classes: ‘Wordsworth – that boring old white middle-class male’, one can hear them saying, ‘who stole his best ideas from his more talented sister Dorothy, who was marginalised by the power structures of her day! And the way his stuff rhymes and scans so

relentlessly – it’s so mechanistic and masculine. Then there is that awkward passage in the poem:

A poet could not but be gay  
In such a jocund company.

The boys down the back would surely burst out laughing. Better to leave it out’.)

I digress. Perhaps the second sentence of the curriculum is better?

Using systematic and creative processes of investigation, scientists produce a constantly evolving body of knowledge and make an important contribution to the decisions which are shaping our world and the world of future generations.

This perhaps eliminates the poet, but not the decent historian. In fact the curriculum never gives a satisfactory account of what science is.

When we come to the page describing the aims of science education, things grow worse. As already noted, science education is to advance learning by ‘promoting science as an activity that is carried out by all people as part of their everyday life’.<sup>2</sup> Such a statement cannot be right. We carry out very little, if any, science in our everyday lives, because modern science is far removed from daily life. We use a great deal of technology, but that does not constitute ‘doing science’. Over the centuries science has developed an elaborate structure of concepts that are mostly way beyond our everyday experience. The idea that ‘everyone is a scientist’ can only serve to spread confusion.

Such an idea evidently betrays an excessive desire to make science seem ‘relevant’. Indeed, the curriculum seriously overdoses on ‘relevance’ in the wrong sense. We are constantly told that students need to see the relevance of science to themselves and to their own experience. Science must be put in context for them. The problem is that if we stick too closely to a student’s own experience, and attempt to show that everyone is a scientist, we cannot adequately convey the body of scientific knowledge that has been built up over the centuries. We end up vainly attempting to reinvent the wheel.

Lydia Austin made this point when writing about a draft version of the curriculum:

Instead of starting with concepts and processes, frequently taught historically, then demonstrating the use of these concepts in

understanding our world, [in the curriculum] the student begins with real world problems which have science components and is expected to collect, analyse and evaluate different sources of data to solve the problem, make decisions and take action.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately:

... most situations that students might be encouraged to ask questions about are quite difficult ...

It has taken a couple of thousand years and many great minds to begin to be able to analyse the world around us and to develop a coherent explanation of what is going on. The scientific understanding we now have of the world is undoubtedly the greatest achievement of the human race.

Not to show students what has been achieved is like expecting students to draw or paint but never to expose them to the works of the great masters.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps revealing is the fuzzy phrase ‘making sense’. This expression features in the very first sentence of the curriculum. It recurs throughout the document, even appearing in the subject headings. Thus biology is headed ‘Making Sense of the Living World’. Some critics have interpreted ‘making sense’ to mean ‘according with common sense’, and have pointed out that this would be an egregious error. After all, science often conflicts with common sense, and frequently succeeds by overturning common sense. It made perfect sense to believe the sun went round the earth, but it was a wrong belief. Similarly the physics of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was very much in accordance with common sense. That is one reason why it lasted unchallenged for two thousand years. Unfortunately virtually all of it was wrong. Defenders of the curriculum deny the equation of ‘making sense of’ and ‘common sense’. However, the sloppy wording invites such an interpretation. Far better to have spoken of ‘understanding’, as in ‘understanding the living world’ and so on.

## **Teacher Flat-out Facilitating**

The science curriculum seems a good example of the teacher-as-facilitator gone mad. Nobody would deny that practical work has a place in science education. The overall flavour of the document, however, can be seen from the first set of ‘possible learning experiences’ that we come upon –

those for level 1 under the strand ‘Making Sense of the Nature of Science and its Relationship to Technology’:

Students *could* be learning by:

- listening to others describe how they think plants grow.
- talking about the activities people do in different seasons.
- exploring how a telephone can be used.
- working in small groups to devise a set of questions to ask a dental therapist about the materials she uses.
- sharing ideas when sitting under a tree with their eyes closed and attempting to distinguish individual sounds.
- making a big book of the class’s ideas about seeds.
- discussing their ideas on when to use scissors.
- giving a talk on how a toy works.
- helping a partner dismantle a toy and sharing ideas about how the different parts work.
- making a toy that floats upright.
- investigating materials to wrap an ice block in to prevent it from melting too quickly.
- discussing the sort of knife that is best for cutting bread [*italics in the original*].<sup>5</sup>

Nowhere in this list do we find the teacher telling the children anything. Thus the teacher does not tell the children anything directly about seeds; they make a big book containing their own ideas about seeds.

### **Out of the Mouths of Babes Hast Thou Ordained Science**

At this point we are forced to introduce the jargon word ‘constructivism’, whose philosophy underlies much of the curriculum and most of the learning examples.

There are many shades of constructivism. We have already come across various aspects of constructivist thought in this book, without using the term. The idea of a teacher being a facilitator is broadly constructivist. So is the claim that knowledge cannot be transmitted. In its place, constructivists emphasise the active ‘construction’ of meaning by the learner – through questioning, through discussion, through trying things out for himself. Constructivists put strong emphasis on the learner’s existing knowledge: this will influence which aspects of the environment the student will attend to when learning. In constructing meaning, the student is said to make links between his existing knowledge and the input received from his environment. According to Beverly Bell: ‘From a constructivist viewpoint, learning is seen as the modification of the learner’s existing ideas’.<sup>6</sup>

It seems a strangely limited view of learning – the mere modification of a person’s existing ideas. Of course good educators will be interested in finding out what their pupils already know. But much of what we wish to tell children is far removed from their existing knowledge and experience. Children’s existing ideas are taken so seriously in constructivist circles that they are often referred to as ‘children’s science’. A New Zealand educationist can write in all seriousness that:

I have sat fascinated in classes where five and six-year-olds debated whether they should describe a cork as floating **and** sinking when part of it was above and part under water. They came to agree that they should think about the cork as a whole. [emphasis in the original].<sup>7</sup>

How splendidly holistic! How Zen! How like the nameless uncarved block that one finds in the writings of Taoism! The writer went on to express his ‘admiration for the kind of thinking these very young children can do’.<sup>8</sup> Other people might not be quite so enthralled.

The extraordinary emphasis placed on students’ existing ideas in constructivist circles is revealed by the injunction in the curriculum that learning is enhanced when ‘teachers and students work 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’ [italics added].<sup>9</sup>

All the beliefs? What about Johnny’s belief that man was created around 6,000 years ago in the course of an energetic six days’ labour on the part of the supreme being? What about Mary’s belief that her lucky colour is green this week, and that she should take particular care on

Wednesday, because that is what she has just read under her star sign in the newspaper astrology column? Should these beliefs really be acknowledged as a basis for learning? If learning is merely modification of one's existing ideas, such ideas will surely take a very great deal of modification to arrive at a scientific world view. Would it not be better for Johnny and Mary to be told that their ideas simply have no basis in science?

## Contradictions in Constructivism

In his critical book on New Zealand science education, Michael Matthews has pointed to:

... a fundamental *theoretical* problem for constructivism – if knowledge cannot be imparted, and if knowledge must be a matter of personal construction, then how can children come to knowledge of complex conceptual schemes that have taken hundreds of years to build up? Many science educators are interested in finding out how, on constructivist principles, one teaches a body of scientific knowledge that is in large part abstract (depending on notions such as velocity, acceleration, force, gene), that is removed from experience (propositions about atomic structure, cellular processes, astronomic events), that has no connection with prior conceptions (ideas of viruses, antibodies, molten core, evolution, electromagnetic radiation), and that is alien to common sense, and in conflict with everyday expectations and concepts [*italics in the original*].<sup>10</sup>

John Clark has put it more robustly:

Constructivism is the wrong theory of learning to get learners from their own often erroneous 'making sense' views of things to the sorts of explanations which are recognisably scientific. ... Those in science education who are waiting for constructivism to provide the goods are not only waiting for the wrong train, they are waiting at the wrong station!<sup>11</sup>

It is also worth noting a fundamental contradiction in constructivism between the dogma that knowledge cannot be taught and the injunction that the teacher understand the ideas and beliefs of his pupils. As Michael Matthews points out:

Teachers are told to find out about and understand things in the minds of their pupils – not just ideas, but values, concerns, prior experiences and so on<sup>12</sup> – but are at the same time told that it is theoretically impossible to inform students of what is in their mind, namely knowledge of the subject matter of science. Pupils telling teachers something is supposedly transparent, or at least possible; teachers telling pupils something is apparently fraught with insuperable theoretical difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

There are some interesting tensions among the learning experiences in the science curriculum. For instance when a child gives a talk about how a toy works, which features among the learning examples above, on constructivist tenets it will presumably be difficult to transmit this knowledge to the other ‘students’. It will constitute a learning experience for him, but not necessarily for the other children. Indeed elements of non-constructivist thought keep breaking through. Moving up to level 3, we find as a ‘possible learning experience’ ‘listening to a visiting Samoan parent describe how smoke can be used to ripen bananas’.<sup>14</sup>

Nowhere in the entire curriculum are we told that children can learn by listening to the *teacher*. In this particular case should not the children be sharing ideas on how best to ripen bananas, and trying out various possibilities for themselves? What gives Samoan parents this advantage – of great interest both to philosophers and educationists – whereby they alone may transmit knowledge? Note, too, that like so much else in the ‘science’ curriculum, using smoke to ripen bananas is technology rather than science; there is no attempt to understand the underlying process. Yet we have a separate technology curriculum.

## A Dumbed-down Curriculum

Many of the other activities in the curriculum are not much more scientifically enlightening than ripening bananas. This is a dumbed-down curriculum.

On level 3 we might be: ‘composing a chant, rap or jingle suggesting possible solutions to the problems faced by an endangered native species’;<sup>15</sup> or ‘boiling an egg to investigate change’;<sup>16</sup> or ‘designing and making simple rubber-band-driven devices and testing their performance’.<sup>17</sup>

On level 4 we could be ‘inviting a kuia or koroua to demonstrate and explain how Maori kai ... is prepared’.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is only Polynesians

who can transmit knowledge. Or we might be ‘devising the most effective way to cool a hot cup of tea’.<sup>19</sup>

On level 5 we could be ‘researching and reporting on the effectiveness of traditional Maori methods of making fire’;<sup>20</sup> or ‘acting out planet orbits to scale on the playing field’.<sup>21</sup>

By level 7 we could be ‘using role play to highlight the issues involved in transporting oil long distances from its source to where it will be used’.<sup>22</sup> And by level 8 we might have reached the stratospheric heights of ‘investigating methods of food preservation in New Zealand, from traditional Maori methods to contemporary methods’.<sup>23</sup>

In general there are too many activities that are not really science. There is far too much connected with technology rather than science. There are too many laboured attempts to bring in ‘Maori scientific knowledge’. And, just as in the social studies curriculum, the students are too often invited to help solve the world’s problems before they have gained sufficient knowledge to make a remotely intelligent contribution towards helping with those problems.

The separate curricula for physics, chemistry and biology share in varying degrees the failings of the general science curriculum. Writing in response to the draft physics curriculum, physics academic Paul Callaghan argued that the document was ‘founded on falsehood’. He painted a picture only too recognisable:

The first fallacy is the notion that students can discover for themselves what the finest minds in the history of science took lifetimes to discover ...

The second fallacy is that physics understanding can be achieved by choosing a problem, taking measurements and thinking about them, or by selecting some readings on the subject, reading them and thinking about them.

Physics is rooted in quantitation and mathematics. To achieve any real understanding in physics requires an ability to abstract key principles and to express those ideas mathematically ...

The final fallacy is that physics should be driven by the personal needs of the students, based on some fashionable notions of gender and ethnicity. The very universality of physics transcends race, gender, religion or political system, as those who practise physics at an international level are well aware.<sup>24</sup>

## Weak Defences

One frequent defence of the science curriculum is that this is a curriculum for ‘all students’. Indeed that is one of the explicit aims of the document. However, if arriving at a curriculum for all students, irrespective of ability, really requires such a watering-down of the subject, that may imply we need different curricula for students of different abilities. Proper science *is* intrinsically difficult. If we do not want the brighter student dying of boredom while she stands near the far goalpost representing Pluto, offering separate curricula might be a more effective way of providing ‘science for all’. Any such idea is anathema to the educational establishment, who would shriek ‘educational apartheid’ at the very suggestion.

Another common defence of the curriculum is to claim that now we are teaching for the understanding, and to portray former science lessons as embodying practices best abandoned when Noah was a boy. For instance, one educationist has written of a lucky minority in science who:

... survived the boredom, copying and rote learning to achieve success in knowing the answers to examination questions. ... Students were told things and they remembered them by copying. Their understanding was tested through their ability to regurgitate these remembered facts.<sup>25</sup>

No doubt the worst science teaching of the past resembled this caricature. As a general description, however, it is a travesty. Good educators in the liberal tradition have always stressed teaching for understanding.

## The Way Forward

What should a good science curriculum do? It should teach more of the content of science: theories, concepts and facts. While doing so, it should remember that the curiosity and wonder motivating scientists today is the same curiosity felt by our primitive ancestors when they looked up at the night sky and questions flooded into their minds about the nature of the stars. Science is part of the whole human adventure: we wish to learn about the universe because it is human to do so, not because we necessarily have any other end in mind. As Lydia Austin has put it: ‘There are many fascinating and beautiful things to be found out about our

world which are not the solution to any problem. We have a duty to give our children a glimpse of this exciting world irrespective of whether they aspire to be scientists'.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, even those thoroughly underwhelmed by science would benefit in one sense from their education if they left school understanding what science *is*. There is a great deal of pseudo-science in the world. In contrast, the whole scientific endeavour has special characteristics that give it a special legitimacy. Science resists easy definition. However, scientists are typically striving to find out general laws of nature through close observation. Many scientists devise controlled experiments. If such an experiment provides a given result in one location, that result should be repeatable elsewhere. Genuine scientists publish their findings honestly, make their data available to others, submit themselves to peer review. They operate on the assumption that any theory is revisable in the light of new evidence or a better theory; uncertainty and doubt is tolerated.

Scientific explanations typically strive to be verifiable by the evidence, or perhaps falsifiable. Only then can a theory be seriously tested. This culture is a world away from Mary's astrology column. The astrology column is not 'science', perhaps because the predictions are so vaguely worded that they would be impossible to verify or falsify. Mary will be a more informed citizen of a democracy if she understands the scientific culture, and thus the difference between science and pseudo-science.

## English – Mediocrity Rules

The first shock on reading the English curriculum is the poor quality of the English. In a document which should presumably be a showcase of the language, the writing is inelegant, vague, and so soporific that it should be on the bedside table of every insomniac in the country. When all due allowance is made for the difficulties involved in drafting by a committee, the irony still seems rich. Readers do not need to take this writer's word for it. The principal author of the Education Forum critique of the draft curriculum was Karl Stead – novelist, poet, critic, and Emeritus Professor of English at Auckland University. Stead found the document 'in many places quite extraordinarily difficult to read – unclear, unspecific, abstract – quite the reverse of what one would expect from a document drawn up by people whose subject is English'.<sup>1</sup>

This is from a writer recently described in the British literary press as 'among the very best contemporary novelists'.<sup>2</sup>

The contents are no better than the style. Not surprisingly, the curriculum bears all the marks of 'child-centred' education, with the teacher relegated to something akin to a facilitator in a group-therapy session. Everything is about students somehow learning; little is about teachers actually teaching. Teachers 'share' things with the class. Students 'explore' things with the teacher or with each other. They discuss things endlessly. They are constantly choosing for themselves. They work frequently in groups. In one suggested activity, they even appear to write a poem as a group.<sup>3</sup>

Amid this orgy of sharing, exploring and choosing, any suggestion that the teacher is better placed than the child, or has a body of knowledge

which, if students attended to, they might find useful or stimulating, is largely absent.

There are the usual pieties about the need for schools to be sensitive to Maori. For instance, ‘the achievement in English of Maori students will be enhanced when teachers are knowledgeable about Maori culture and when Maori knowledge is affirmed and respected in the classroom’.<sup>4</sup> As usual, no supporting argument is given for such a statement. Nor is it explained why the same reasoning should not also apply to ethnic Chinese students and Chinese culture. Nor is ‘Maori knowledge’ defined.

One of the more bizarre aspects of the curriculum is the emphasis it gives to so-called visual language. ‘Visual language: viewing and presenting’ occupies one whole strand alongside just two other strands – ‘written language: reading and writing’ and ‘oral language: listening and speaking’. It is only by using the weasel word ‘language’, rather than the more specific word ‘English’, that the visual strand saves itself from simply sounding absurd. For this is supposedly the *English* curriculum. English is about reading and writing, listening and speaking, in *English*. Any ‘visual English’ that does not involve reading or writing is virtually an oxymoron.

## Misreading Evolution

Sure enough, the ‘visual language’ strand includes a ragbag of mostly peripheral topics such as watching soap operas, studying pop videos and designing posters. Not all of the activities are as lightweight as that. The strand does include film, which can be a serious art form as well as entertainment. But it is doubtful whether film even belongs in such a strand.<sup>5</sup> The strand as a whole receives greatly disproportionate weighting, and crowds out more important work. This undue emphasis on the visual constitutes one of the gravest weaknesses of the curriculum.

Another weakness is the equal weighting between ‘oral language’ and ‘written language’. There is a fundamental difference in difficulty involved. Without attending school, any child will learn oral English to at least some degree of sophistication. Humans really do seem to possess a special disposition for learning speech that has evolved in the course of our history as a species. That is why each new generation of parents continues to be amazed by the ease with which their offspring pick up speech, learning new words at a phenomenal rate and soon stringing together perfectly formed sentences, whether in English or Siamese. We do seem to have a language instinct.<sup>6</sup>

Writing down our oral language in a special code, and deciphering that code (reading), came much later in human history. These are cultural acquisitions which can be traced back only a few thousand years. Thus some aspects of reading and writing do not come naturally. They need to be learned by each generation with a certain degree of effort and concentration, though the task can be enjoyable. That is why many children never learn to read and write adequately – even after schooling. And that is why the core of any school English curriculum must be reading and writing. The curriculum wholly fails to provide this emphasis.

It is sometimes claimed that ‘alternative literacies’, such as computers and the Internet, make the ability to read and write English less important than in the past. Yet such a view cannot be sustained. A computer screen is typically full of English. We still need the capacity to read in order to understand our email messages, and to digest material found on the world wide web. We still need to be able to write to send our own messages. Even understanding the computer itself is much easier if one can read the manual. For the foreseeable future, reading and writing will remain crucial.

In learning to read, children need to become aware of certain things that are far from obvious. For instance, our speech actually comes out as one long, connected sound. In listening we instinctively detach one sound from another and one word from another, in order to make sense. Thus the words of a spoken sentence are not like a series of eggs sitting in an egg carton. They are almost like an omelette that we must instinctively unscramble. In learning to read, children need to understand explicitly that spoken words are composed of units of sound and that sentences are composed of words. They need to understand that writing is a code for our speech, and that the letters stand for sounds. Understanding these things, along with some systematic teaching of letter–sound combinations (phonics), is important.

Unfortunately phonics instruction has been in seriously bad odour with ‘progressive’ educationists for many years. One school principal recalls being told in 1981 by a visiting school inspector: ‘You aren’t using phonics are you? Good heavens, that went out with the ark.’<sup>7</sup> The dominant method of teaching reading, ‘whole language’, gives no systematic instruction in letter–sound combinations. Eminent Canadian-born psychologist Steven Pinker sums up the problem inherent in such an approach:

[Under whole language] the insight that language is a naturally developing human instinct has been garbled into the evolutionarily

improbable claim that *reading* is a naturally developing human instinct. Old-fashioned practice at connecting letters to sounds is replaced by immersion in a text-rich social environment, and the children don't learn to read.<sup>8</sup> [Italics in the original.]

## The Strange World of Whole Language

The whole-language approach has not found its way into every primary school classroom. But by the nineties it had become the orthodoxy, promoted by the Ministry of Education and the colleges of education. Moreover, the so-called Reading Recovery programme for poor readers was designed along whole-language lines. Reading Recovery involves one-on-one tuition with up to a quarter of early readers.

The basic idea behind whole language is that children will best learn to read if they are immersed in a language-rich environment, with quality books from the beginning, and a strong emphasis on reading and writing for meaning rather than on strict accuracy. The American credited with pioneering whole language, Ken Goodman, has drawn misleading parallels between learning to read and learning to speak, as have various other 'progressive' educationists.<sup>9</sup> According to Goodman, 'direct instruction in phonics is neither necessary nor desirable'.<sup>10</sup> It is believed children will pick up the letter-sound relationships in the course of reading and writing. Children are encouraged to invent their own spelling if they are unsure of a word. In a whole-language classroom children are seen as very much in control of the learning process – reading authentic material, writing from their experience, inventing spellings if necessary, and monitoring their own progress. These aspects of whole language give it obvious appeal to 'progressive' educationists.

Whole language evidently puts enormous reliance on context in helping children learn to read. According to Goodman, 'reading, like listening, is a sampling, predicting, guessing process'.<sup>11</sup> This rather fantastic statement stands in strong contrast to the common-sense belief that reading is more a matter of decoding the print to work out the meaning of each word, and using context only to resolve any ambiguities. Under whole language, children are encouraged to cope with a difficult word by reading the whole sentence, and using that context to predict the word. If that fails, the first letter or letters of a word might be used to help. The New Zealand English curriculum trots out this dogma: 'While discussing and reading the text, students are encouraged to sample and predict, make approximations, and use cue sources to cross-check and confirm their understanding'.<sup>12</sup>

However, the evidence is accumulating that we do not read by mainly guessing. According to reading expert Tom Nicholson, ‘guessing is a “fickle friend”. Guessing is a strategy used much more by poor readers than good. Good readers can read words so effortlessly that it doesn’t matter if they read words in context or in isolation.’<sup>13</sup> Instead, the evidence suggests that we probably process every word, and indeed every letter of every word.<sup>14</sup> Thus poor readers do need to become good at the decoding process: they need phonics instruction.

## We Do Teach Phonics – Or Do We?

Not that phonics alone is necessarily the answer. Whole language has some strengths. Although phonics outperforms whole language, a combination of the two may produce better results than either method on its own, especially if combined with explicit instruction that words are composed of individual sounds. Unfortunately, one searches in vain for any balance in our current English curriculum.

Because phonics accords so readily with common sense, teachers in the English-speaking world often come under pressure from parents to teach phonics. They have evolved various defence mechanisms over the years. One response is simply to say that they are the experts: ‘Trust us: we know what we are doing’. Another common response is to say they do, in fact, teach phonics. Rita Kramer records an exchange between student and lecturer in an American college of education:

‘What do you do when parents complain that their kids aren’t learning phonics?’

Her answer to that one brought down the house. ‘Don’t *tell* them you don’t teach phonics’ she said. Then added, ‘You do’. They all smiled and nodded, as though they understood quite well what she meant.<sup>15</sup> [*Italics in the original.*]

Similarly in this country successive ministers of education have assured the nation that our schools do teach phonics. Somewhere along the line, wool is being pulled over somebody’s eyes.

In other English-speaking countries the nineties saw a trend back towards phonics as compared to whole-language and similar approaches. A number of American states made increased use of phonics. In Britain the Blair Government introduced a literacy hour in primary schools, which – in theory at least – includes phonics instruction. There has even been

some encouraging news in New Zealand recently, first in the form of a report to the government by a Literacy Experts Group.<sup>16</sup> The group opposed relying on reading for meaning as the primary strategy for attacking unfamiliar words, and recommended more balanced instruction, not least in the Reading Recovery programme. And in 2001 an enquiry into reading by a parliamentary select committee recommended that instruction include phonics.<sup>17</sup> Whether the pendulum in New Zealand is genuinely swinging back towards phonics remains to be seen.

## Grammar Makes One Ghostly Appearance

There appears to be no requirement in the curriculum to assess individual progress at an early age in such basic knowledge as spelling or word vocabulary. Grammar is almost totally forgotten; it gets one token mention and is thereafter dispatched into oblivion. In an earlier draft it had been omitted altogether. There is no specific requirement to teach children the nature of a noun, or a verb, or other parts of speech. There is no specific requirement to convey the fact that most sentences have as their building block a subject and a verb. There is room for genuine debate about how much grammar should be taught in schools. But what is the point of a national curriculum if it does not lay down that the most basic facts about the structure of English be taught?

Let us assume, if only for the sake of argument, that comparatively little formal grammar need be taught in schools. If that is the case, two things become quite imperative:

- substantial practice in writing
- feedback from a teacher who can recognise good, bad or indifferent English.

The first requirement is obviously not provided by English classes: students are far too busy watching television, having their endless discussions, solving the world's problems, and unburdening their psyches on a huge range of topics. And proper feedback from a teacher may often be missing too. An ominous passage reads:

*Language development is fostered by an environment which encourages creativity and experimentation.*

Students should be encouraged to experiment and take risks with language to explore ideas. Trial and error and approximations in

written and spoken English are part of the learning process and give opportunities for well-focused teaching to develop students' knowledge and skills.<sup>18</sup> [Italics in the original.]

Does this mean that teachers should not be so judgemental as to correct spelling and grammar, for fear of stifling creativity? If not, what *does* it mean? The passage certainly gives no discouragement to the widespread practice of leaving mistakes uncorrected. Moreover, even with the best will in the world, it is doubtful whether many teachers trained since the 1970s have themselves sufficient knowledge of grammar to assist children to the fullest.<sup>19</sup>

There is too much emphasis in the curriculum on creative writing at the expense of the more prosaic types of writing that most of the children will be doing in the course of their adult lives, such as writing business letters and reports where the purpose is not to let the imagination hang loose but rather to put down one's thoughts in a clear and logical manner. Nor is there any sign of comprehension exercises in the curriculum. For reasons not entirely clear, these are deeply unfashionable at present. The excellent exercise of writing a précis, where comprehension and accurate writing are practised at the same time, is even more dead in the water in the hands of our modern educationists.

## An Intellectual Backwater

If literacy is a big loser from the curriculum, so is literature. It is the role of a liberal education to introduce young minds to a selection of the finest things their civilisation has produced. One of these is plainly literature written in English. Here the curriculum is woefully deficient. It cites no classic authors to study – not Shakespeare, not Dickens, not a single one of the long line of poets who constitute one of the glories of the British tradition. Individual teachers are still free to teach quality literature, in between viewings of *Shortland St.*, but there is no vision of excellence in literature, or key to what is considered worth studying.

As Karl Stead has put it:

The crown of English studies ought to be the encounter with literature, which offers the best, richest and most exciting examples of language use, the folk stories of our inherited European culture as well as the tales of our own settler and post-colonial experience – a fund of wisdom, a storehouse of fact, and a range of experience beyond the powers of any one person to live through in many

lifetimes. The very best of poetry or fiction exposes readers, as often as they care to open a good book, to the influence of minds and sensibilities finer, more developed, richer, than they are likely to meet more than once or twice, if ever, in real life.

It is not good enough for an English syllabus to signal vaguely in the direction of this great treasure house, indicating that teachers should show their students around, or tell them where the keys are kept, as and when it seems appropriate and possible .... If a syllabus drawn up by teachers of English will not trumpet its worth and insist upon maximising its potential for value by specifying how, where, how much of, and at what level of richness and complexity, it is to figure in the teaching of their subject, then New Zealand might as well resign itself to becoming an intellectual and cultural backwater.<sup>20</sup>

The conditions the curriculum does lay down merely risk making matters worse. ‘New Zealand texts, including those by Maori authors and about Maori, should form a significant part of the wide range of texts that students will explore’.<sup>21</sup> As already noted, ‘texts should include and reflect the achievements, interests, and perspectives of girls, women, boys and men’.<sup>22</sup> That constitutes quite a bonanza for that rare species – a genuinely good, female, Maori writer! Only the tiniest fraction of the finest English literature is by or about Maori. What else would we expect, given their tiny numbers and quite recent entry into the world of letters? Moreover, most of the finest English poets and dramatists are men. History is what actually happened, not what we might wish had happened. An obsession with racial and gender balance risks impoverishing the curriculum. The architects of the curriculum do not appear to care very much: they are more interested in pursuing their own agenda.

The neglect of Shakespeare seems particularly indefensible. He wrote in our own language, for a popular audience; his plays are vivid, immediate and fast-moving; and we have already noted his truly universal nature. It is true that Elizabethan English sounds archaic to students. And the ubiquity of today’s electronic media perhaps means students’ ears are less attuned to poetry than in the past. However, that only makes it more important that students be encouraged to make an effort at something difficult and worthwhile, rather than settle for the easy and superficial.

## The ‘Bad’ Old Days

Curriculum statements do not need to be obscure, evasive and cringingly apologetic about Western culture. After wading through the sludge of

the 1994 English curriculum, it is a relief to come upon extracts from the 1904 English syllabus for New Zealand primary schools:

The chief objects of the instruction in reading shall be 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 pupils to form the habit of reading good books. The reading of such books might, indeed, well replace all other kinds of homework.

Poetry set for recitation should, while suited to the age of the pupils, be chosen for its literary merit as well as for the interest it arouses ....

The object of the instruction in composition shall be to train the children in the correct and ready use of their mother tongue, both in speech and in writing.<sup>23</sup>

Nobody would claim that everything was rosy in New Zealand schools in 1904. However, anyone gathering evidence for the thesis that Western civilisation in the late twentieth century was in terminal decline would surely snap up these extracts for comparison with virtually any passage of our current English curriculum.

## Two Other Curricula

It is not easy for a layperson such as the present author adequately to assess the mathematics curriculum. But the document does appear to be less bad than many of the others. Like other curricula, it suffers from having been forced into the straightjacket of the curriculum framework. It also remains relentlessly politically correct. But it appears to be clearer, more detailed, and more rigorous than a document such as the English curriculum. In its introductory sections there are comparatively few statements that strike the reader as self-evidently silly. Moreover, the existence of a ‘development band’ of activities for faster students is a welcome recognition that not every student has the same needs.

Nonetheless, just as in the science curriculum, there is a clear overemphasis on learning through problem-solving and on ‘relevance’ to personal experience. According to the curriculum:

Students learn mathematical thinking most effectively through applying concepts and skills in interesting and realistic contexts

which are personally meaningful to them. Thus, mathematics is best taught by helping students to solve problems drawn from their own experience.<sup>24</sup>

As a general statement this is far too sweeping, since ultimately we must often move beyond such a context. British educationist Geoffrey Howson has argued that:

... mathematics instruction must initially be based on the child's reality, knowledge and interests. However, at some stage there is a need to move over to a more abstract view of mathematics. The importance of any mathematical concept is that it is abstract, and as a result can be applied to all types of contexts.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, while welcoming to some extent the emphasis on activities in the New Zealand mathematics curriculum, he points out that:

... simply loading a curriculum with 'ings' (for example on p 45 we have learning, exploring, using, extending, investigating, relating, talking, saying, inventing, developing, maintaining, devising, solving, writing, finding, ...) does not answer any real pedagogical or curricular problem ... an attempt to teach mathematics solely through activity is bound to fail, if only because students have to be helped to construct a framework with reference to which they can organise knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

One of the strangest of the curricula is that for health and physical education. In a sense, the curriculum is an extraordinarily ambitious document, being partly concerned – as already noted – with 'wellbeing' in all its aspects. The Maori concept of wellbeing ('hauora') is so important it needs a page to itself.<sup>27</sup> More seriously, the curriculum wants to encourage students to 'participate in creating healthy communities by taking responsible and critical action'.<sup>28</sup> That gives the curriculum writers the opening to include a great deal of material that could have come straight out of the social studies curriculum – with all the same implicit bias and agenda of left-wing indoctrination.

While for obvious reasons this agenda is smothered somewhat in the curriculum itself, it is clearly on display in an article written by one of the principal authors of the curriculum, Gillian Tasker.<sup>29</sup> Thus, not content with perpetrating the social studies curriculum, the Ministry of Education has even allowed empire-building on the part of 'social studies' in the form of an invasion of the health curriculum. It is rather a depressing prospect.

## Epilogue: Widening the Gaps Revisited

There can be little doubt that poor and inadequate curricula have a greater negative impact on struggling schools than on well-led schools. For the best schools, some of the curriculum statements are more an irritant than a serious obstacle to learning. Their vague and permissive nature allows teachers and principals latitude.

For instance, Pt Chevalier School is one of the better primary schools. According to its Deputy Principal, Sandra Aitken:

At Pt Chevalier school we teach reading through a mixture of whole language and phonics. Each child is individually assessed. Some receive more whole-language instruction, while some receive more phonics. No child receives just whole language or just phonics. We have very few children on the Reading Recovery programme – just four at the moment. But we do use some of the Reading Recovery techniques with groups of larger size – around four or five children per group. Since Reading Recovery is expensive, we believe our own approach represents a better use of resources.<sup>1</sup>

Evidently this is a school that has thought about how to teach reading rather than simply accepting every fashionable nostrum promoted by the ministry and the colleges of education.

At secondary level, good schools appreciate the limitations of the curricula. According to John Morris:

At Auckland Grammar we typically go beyond the curricula. For instance, the social studies curriculum is a very weak document. It is awful really. We pay lip-service to it, but try to teach it in a more academic way. Thus at third and fourth form level we teach more real history and real geography. We don't

have any booklets with lots of pictures and easy questions, which is what social studies tends to be these days. We give it a more academic focus. That stands our pupils in good stead for when they do history or geography at senior level. In mathematics and science we get to fifth form level in two years. Especially in the core areas of English, mathematics, science and social studies, we ask ourselves what third or fourth formers are capable of doing, and what will prepare them well for the future.<sup>2</sup>

In schools that share the intellectual limitations and diminished horizons of the curricula, however, the quality of teaching and the expectations placed on the children are typically much lower.

## PART 4

# ASSESSMENT ATROCITIES



## The Wild-goose Chase of Unit Standards

### **Fighting the Class War**

For many years our ‘progressive’ educationists have had the School Certificate and Bursary examinations in their sights. They have argued that externally set and marked exams, where students are awarded a percentage, are inequitable, fail to give a rounded picture of a student’s abilities, rank students unfairly, stigmatise some of them as failures, and even perpetuate the existing class structure.

In the process, examinations have often been caricatured as a ‘half-win, half-lose model’.<sup>1</sup> David Hood, driving force behind the ‘unit standards’ fiasco, has written:

Suppose we devised a written examination on business management for members of the Business Roundtable. The reality of any examination is that someone will come first, someone second, and someone last. If we view that examination as a competition, a one-off performance, then I am certain the Business Roundtable would be happy to congratulate the ‘winners’ and commiserate with the ‘losers’. If, however, the decision was made that the 50 percent of members who scored below the ‘average’ had failed, and as a consequence had to resign, then I am sure they would be less than happy about that use of the results.

But it is for exactly this purpose that traditional external examinations were designed.<sup>2</sup>

*Exactly* this purpose? Even in the days when precisely half the students sitting School Certificate English scored over 50 per cent, a score of 49 per cent scarcely branded the recipient as a failure in English. It told a future employer, and the student herself, that she was average at English – that there was virtually no difference between her score and a mark of 50 per cent. If David Hood had ever scored 49 per cent in an exam, he would not have taken it as an invitation to jump off the nearest bridge. More recently, more than 50 per cent were passing School Certificate English.

Hood goes on to say that traditional external examinations:

... were a response to the demands of the industrial age which required relatively few workers being educated beyond the early years of secondary schooling. Examination results were the means of progressively sifting out those 15 or 20 percent of children deemed capable of being educated to become the decision-makers of industrial society.<sup>3</sup>

## The True Rationale for Exams

But examinations have been much more than that. They have been a key means of sorting students right through the ability spectrum. School leavers display a very wide range of abilities and accomplishments. We want their next step in the world to be as consistent as possible with their personal characteristics. University departments often seek to restrict their intakes to people with some chance of passing their courses. The taxpayer wishes to know which students are worth subsidising. Medical schools want students with outstanding academic ability: would we want our doctors on any other terms? And employers are looking for people all through the ability and interest spectrum.

It is a truism – indeed a cliché – that New Zealand’s most valuable resource is its people. Thus we have purely economic reasons for wanting some system that matches people to occupations in an efficient manner. Exams also give valuable information to school leavers themselves about their accomplishments and potential. Life will sort them out eventually. If a school leaver has not been good at English, we do her absolutely no favours by telling her otherwise.

Like all human institutions, the School Certificate and Bursary examinations were not perfect. However, school reports provided employers with additional information. Elements of internal assessment had also been creeping into the system, to widen the abilities assessed.

Marks awarded in internal assessment were consistent with marks awarded externally. Waikikamukau High could not award brilliant marks in the internal assessment component of bursary physics if its students only scored average marks on the external component. By ‘moderating’ the internal against the external, consistency was maintained amongst schools.

Most countries with well-performing education sectors have external examinations. In New Zealand school certificate and bursary served as one of the bulwarks slowing down the general drift to mediocrity in our schools. They provided students with clear goals. The publication of each school’s examination results also constituted a powerful discipline. Badly-performing schools were placed under moral pressure to improve. To the extent that school choice existed, bad schools tended to lose students to good.

It is true that a school’s exam results are not everything. ‘Progressive’ educationists frequently lamented the fact that exam statistics could be taken simplistically by parents, and thus misused. However, that did not constitute a reason to make them unavailable. All information can be – and often is – misused. One cannot listen to Parliament for half an hour without hearing statistics used, abused and misused, but that is no reason to close down Statistics New Zealand. Even the theorem of Pythagoras can lead to innocent bystanders being accidentally stabbed in the hypotenuse, as British journalist Bernard Levin once dryly noted in this very context of school exam results.<sup>4</sup> An open society allows information to be made available and trusts people to use it.

It was this system that ‘progressive’ educationists in New Zealand came increasingly to regard as ‘elitist’. And it was this system that began coming under siege in the early 1990s when the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, newly emerged from a restructuring of the education bureaucracy and with David Hood as chief executive, began running a bizarre experiment on New Zealand students – ‘unit standards’.

## **The New Zealand Experiment**

Unit standards was based on a superficially attractive idea – that rather than ranking students against one another they should be assessed against ‘standards’, with reports stating what they knew or could actually do. Students should be given credit for having met a defined standard. Fewer young people would then feel themselves to be failures. This philosophy can be traced back to the US, where it was first used by the military to

train recruits in very specific tasks such as stripping down and reassembling a gun. There were some not-very-successful attempts to apply the philosophy to teacher training. It also appeared in Britain, first in youth training schemes for unemployed school leavers, then expanding into general vocational training, where the Scottish system turned out to be particularly influential on New Zealand.

In this country, under the original plan for the new National Qualifications Framework, school subjects were to be divided into a large number of capsules of learning – unit standards. For each standard a student would be assessed as either ‘competent’ or ‘not yet competent’, with no three ways about it. Re-sits were permitted. A student would accumulate credits towards a qualification by gradually accumulating unit standards. The system was not just for school students: one of the great attractions of unit standards was that they would also be offered by a wide range of other organisations – from employers giving on-the-job training to various private training establishments. Indeed, all education and training from Form Five upwards, and all recognised qualifications, were to be delivered in this very singular manner. This was the ‘seamless education system’ which so caught the imagination of Lockwood Smith when Minister of Education. Many were also attracted to the elimination of the allegedly artificial divide between academic and vocational subjects, and to the fuller information on student achievement supposedly forthcoming under unit standards.

The National Qualifications Framework was an extraordinarily ambitious plan. The framework was seen as essentially comprising interchangeable building blocks, each demonstrating the attainment of a given competency. Unit standards earned in one form of education could be credited to another. Moreover, as British educationist Alan Smithers put it: ‘Creating the units for any imaginable qualification was not thought to be a problem. If you like, it was conceived as a kind of educational Lego’.<sup>5</sup> So out-of-touch were the unit standards enthusiasts that they seriously intended implementing the structure all the way up to higher university degrees. From teacher to plumber, from car mechanic to nuclear physicist, from doctor to butcher to baker to candlestick maker, one qualifications structure would serve for all.

Unit standards were such a strange new idea, and their language so novel, that at first people found it difficult to get their heads around the concept. As *North & South* writer Jenny Chamberlain put it:

... the obscure, shifting, jargon-loaded nature of the scheme has made it hard to grasp. Those who will be chiefly responsible for

putting it into practice just plain don't understand it, and one of the reasons it has not been the focus of strong political debate is that politicians don't understand it either ....

Becoming framework literate is like being initiated into a new religion, like learning to speak in tongues.<sup>6</sup>

The framework would have been a genuine experiment. No other country had anything remotely equivalent to unit standards throughout their entire post-compulsory education and training. The contrast with the post-1984 economic reforms was most instructive. Those policies were often referred to as an experiment. However, whether we loved or loathed the reforms, they were no experiment. Critics of the policies, when they were honest, admitted that economic liberalisation had been a worldwide phenomenon over that period. Almost all the economic initiatives introduced in this country had counterparts elsewhere. Many of the genuine innovations – such as the Reserve Bank Act and the Fiscal Responsibility Act – were widely copied overseas.<sup>7</sup> Unit standards were different: they had 'mad scientist' written all over them.

Jenny Chamberlain asked our Qualifications Authority to specify the countries which unit standards would be bringing New Zealand on to a par with. She was told South Africa, Namibia, the Maldives, Scotland and Vietnam. Even in Scotland – the one, lonely, respectable developed country on the list – a standards-based approach was being used only for vocational training.

### **Keeping up with the Maldives (island group in the Indian Ocean; population 300,000; dirt poor)**

Heading into the unknown is not always wrong. But it should at least be based on sound research. Unfortunately, there are many reasons why unit standards in schools would never have worked.

#### *Learning Is Not Always About Attaining 'Outcomes'*

The point of reading a novel, listening to a piece of music or viewing a work of art is not to achieve some pre-set 'outcome'. It is to engage with the work of art and, perhaps, share the insights of the writer, composer or painter. It may not be easy to assess how well an English student has analysed a novel by Jane Austen. However, it surely cannot be done against some standard defined in advance. Ultimately the degree of insight,

sensitivity and logical coherence she brings to her response is best judged by people experienced and skilled at evaluating these traits – i.e., exam markers – and her response compared to those of others.

### *Defining ‘Standards’ Always Involves Ambiguity*

Crucial to unit standards is that ‘standards’ can always be expressed clearly and unambiguously. Otherwise we cannot expect consistency between assessors. Unfortunately, most human activity does not fall into that category. On some occasions we might be able to set a fairly objective standard. We might be able to set a standard for running the mile by specifying a time in which to complete that event – say four minutes. But what about setting a standard for so-called ‘higher-order thinking’ such as analysing the origins of the First World War? When we examine the standards developed during the trial of the qualifications framework, we find ourselves swimming in a sea of fluff. Just as with the outcome statements in the national curricula, the standards turn out to be anything but clear and transparent.

For instance in one history unit standard the first element is ‘Locate and gather historical information’. The performance criteria are:

- 1.1 Sources located are *appropriate* to the topic of the investigation
- 1.2 The gathered information is *in accordance with* the topic of the investigation [italics added].<sup>8</sup>

We are back with our old friend ‘appropriate’ – that fudge word often used in the curriculum documents. The fog quotient scarcely diminishes when we come to ‘in accordance with’. If this constitutes a ‘clear and transparent standard’, Bill Clinton has never told a lie.

### *There is no clear distinction between ‘competent’ and ‘not yet competent’*

Even when the standard is something as straightforward as being able to run a mile in four minutes, complicating factors can intrude. How often does a runner need to be able to run a four-minute mile to qualify as ‘competent’ – once, most of the time, or all the time? What if the runner can achieve that feat in front of a home crowd but not in front of a hostile crowd? What if it depends on the type of surface, or the weather conditions?

What if she needs a pacemaker? What if she needs certain drugs?

Consider goal-kicking in rugby. How do we judge whether somebody is competent or not competent at goal-kicking? Ultimately it comes down to making comparisons between people. If most of us could raise the flags from 60 metres out 95 per cent of the time, we would probably not regard Andrew Mehrstens as a competent rugby goal-kicker. But we cannot, and so we do.

With academic subjects such as mathematics, German and chemistry, classifying everyone as either ‘competent’ or ‘not yet competent’ at meeting some given standard becomes an even more heroic task. We wish to do more than simply recognise ‘competence’ in some arbitrary sense. We wish to make comparisons. We wish to recognise excellence. Under the qualifications framework the only way a good student would have stood out from another student was through accumulating credits more quickly. Though David Hood was ‘against ranking’, the system would at least have allowed that degree of distinction. Yet being faster at a given task is far from the only difference between a good student and a bad.

### *An Overall Capability Cannot be Assessed Simply By Adding Up a Large Number of Small Components*

Knowing how to pass a rugby ball and knowing how to kick a rugby ball are separate skills. But a mere list of skills such as these does not add up to a good rugby player. A good first five-eighths must not only be skilled at passing and kicking. He must be a good judge of when to pass and when to kick. He must be able to ‘read a game’. Ultimately all his skills must be combined and integrated.

If that holds true for the rugby player, it is also true for the historian, economist or physicist. When we attempt to break an academic subject into fragments, and then assess those fragments, we may fail to do justice to the deeper insight that makes use of connections among the components. Even many vocational subjects cannot be treated in this manner. As Alan Smithers has argued:

... an analysis of what a plumber, hairdresser or teacher does cannot, of itself, provide a specification of skilled performance. ... The essence of subjects, applied education and occupational training almost seems to disappear in the attempt to express them as numerous performance criteria.<sup>9</sup>

By now we are perhaps beginning to see why critics of unit standards sometimes employed the metaphor of Procrustes' bed. In Greek legend Procrustes was a robber who made his victims lie on an iron bed. If they were too long for the bed, he chopped a piece or two off them, until they fitted the bed. If they were too short, this charming man stretched them until they were long enough. Unit standards seemed bent on forcing all human experience and all human variety into just one narrow framework. It was repeating the mistake of the curriculum framework. That framework had been rigid and comprehensive enough to warm the heart of any bureaucrat, but it was flawed. Similarly unit standards was a bureaucrat's nirvana: it sought to impose one single model right through a huge swathe of society. Unfortunately a great deal had to be cut and stretched to fit the framework. As Michael Irwin has put it:

Sometime in the future we will find that education is really much more messy than we thought and resistant to the nice neat categories and distinctions which our search for frameworks assumes exist. The trouble is that we can, in the meantime, do a lot of damage as we lop and chop to make education fit preconceived Procrustean beds<sup>10</sup>.

### *Teachers Cannot be Unbiased Assessors*

Making objective assessment is a difficult enough task at the best of times. It is more difficult still when the people whose work is to be judged are known personally to the assessors, and the assessors themselves have an interest in the outcome. Such is the case with unit standards. Teachers are human. They get on with certain pupils better than others. We can all remember the 'teacher's pet' and the pupil who rubbed the teacher up the wrong way. Most teachers, most of the time, want their students to do well, since that is the natural human feeling towards people we have come to know personally.

More seriously, under unit standards the success or otherwise of the student reflects, at least to some extent, on the competence of the teacher. The teacher has a personal interest in his student passing as many unit standards as possible. Competent and professional teachers do their utmost to banish such thoughts from their mind – or at least their conscious mind. However, the fundamental conflict of interest remains. As for the unprofessional teachers, they are not so scrupulous. Their students are in luck.

Thanks to the power of the teacher unions and the pusillanimous nature of successive governments, there are incompetent teachers in

our schools. Can we really trust these teachers to assess their students with integrity?

A great deal ends up resting on the ‘moderation’ process designed to ensure consistency between teachers and between schools. The more resources we pile into moderation, however, the more the costs mount up. More fundamentally, who moderates the moderators?

### *The Teacher Workload is Horrendous*

With the requirement to assess students on all the units of a fragmented curriculum, as well as allowing any number of re-sits, the teacher assessment workload quickly becomes enormous – especially for the conscientious teacher. There is less time for actual teaching. Good people leave the profession rather than be reduced to tickers of boxes.

### *Costs Everywhere Pile Up*

The costs pile up under ever-greater attempts to make a fundamentally unworkable system work.

## **Not Up to Standard**

In conclusion, describing the New Zealand Qualifications Framework as ‘not yet competent’ would have been altogether too kind. The framework would never have been competent. It would never have provided a consistent, effective, nationwide system of assessment. Its failures were fundamental and intractable. Many critics were scathing. According to educationist Warwick Elley:

I liken this to the case of Social Credit. When Social Credit was in its heyday it was difficult to find a single economist in the country who supported it. It died a natural death. Now we’ve got a qualifications framework being foisted on us and every specialist in assessment has been strongly critical.<sup>11</sup>

The criticism was certainly not confined to education traditionalists. It also came from many members of the educational establishment. They saw the attempt to specify very detailed outcomes as deadening. To that extent, David Hood was not a typical member of the educational establishment, if there is such a thing.

Ultimately it was not any of its more theoretical weaknesses which

sank unit standards in schools as a universal solution. It was teacher workload. The secondary teachers union had at first welcomed the new qualifications framework. As the implications from the trialling process began to sink in, however, teachers were turning increasingly hostile. By then the promoters of the framework were feeling the pressure from many quarters. Universities were highly reluctant to offer unit standards. The ‘buy-in’ from industry had been slower than expected. Teachers were screaming about their workload. There were also many complaints that unit standards did not recognise excellence.

However, rather than fundamentally reconsider the thinking that was leading the education system into the cactus, the Government embarked on a succession of modifications in an attempt to limit the worst of the political damage.

## The Quagmire of the NCEA

### **Clear and Transparent Backdown**

In early 1996 we saw the first major signs of the National Qualifications Framework beginning to unravel. In a confusing paper, officials successfully recommended to Cabinet that they allow qualifications to be registered on the framework as whole qualifications rather than being comprised of unit standards.<sup>1</sup> This was presented to ministers as evolution. To the more acute critics of the framework, it was evident that officials were recommending a fundamental change from the concept of a framework consisting wholly of unit standards.<sup>2</sup> In our system of government it is ministers, not officials, who make significant policy decisions. Yet in this case ministers appeared to be misled about the implications of the change. To be fair to the officials, large elements of the cock-up theory might be brought in, besides any conspiracy theories, to explain the deception. After all, from the beginning had not unit standards been one enormous cock-up?

It would be tedious to relate all the remaining twists and turns, government Green Papers and government White Papers, ambiguous announcements, changes and backdowns, sound and fury, huff and puff, delays and political compromises, by which ‘achievement standards’ made their appearance, and all senior school education turned into ‘standards’ of one variety or another. When the dust had settled, School Certificate and Bursary had been replaced by a National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) whose key elements were:

1. Three levels ranging from level one in the Fifth Form to level three in the Seventh Form, with special level-three scholarship examinations for the brightest students.
2. Most conventional subjects now divided into achievement standards (usually between five and eight), which were somewhat larger than their equivalent unit standards.
3. Each achievement standard assessed either internally by the classroom teacher, or externally by examination, and reported separately.
4. The external components of a conventional subject typically around 60 per cent.
5. Unit standards remaining for non-conventional subjects such as recreation and forestry, and still apparently remaining for conventional subjects in those schools wishing to teach in that manner.
6. Three grades for those passing achievement standards – ‘credit’, ‘merit’ and ‘excellence’, as well as ‘no credit’ (the latest euphemism for ‘fail’).
7. Unit standards assessed wholly internally, and remaining simply on a credit/ no-credit basis.
8. Schools permitted to offer any combination of achievement standards and unit standards.
9. No scaling of any form (at least officially)<sup>3</sup> and no attempt to moderate a student’s internally assessed achievement standards against his externally assessed achievement standards.
10. An annual report for each student showing credits for unit and achievement standards, and grades for achievement standards.
11. An overall mark in each traditional subject calculated by aggregating the results for the individual achievement standards (a late and inconsistent addition to the mix).<sup>4</sup>
12. An NCEA at a given level gained by earning 80 credits from unit and achievement standards, including 60 credits at that level.

This extraordinary dog’s breakfast is somehow claimed to combine ‘the best assessment practices, here and overseas, of the last 20 years’.<sup>5</sup>

## Fog Descends Again – The Achievement Standards

We have already noted the chronic vagueness in the national curricula and in the unit standards developed from the curricula. This vagueness carries over into the achievement standards. For instance the Draft English standards for level 1 students (i.e., Fifth Formers) might equally be set for 10-year-olds:

- 1.1 Produce creative writing
- 1.2 Produce formal writing
- 1.3 Read, study and understand an extended written text
- 1.4 Read, study and understand a number of short written texts
- 1.5 View/listen to, study and understand a visual or oral text
- 1.6 Read and understand unfamiliar texts
- 1.7 Deliver a speech in a formal situation
- 1.8 Produce a media or dramatic presentation
- 1.9 Research and present information.<sup>6</sup>

Vagueness can also be found in the so-called assessment criteria. Four sets are given for the first achievement standard, ‘produce creative writing’, which is internally assessed. The first set are:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| credit     | <i>express</i> idea(s) with detail in a piece of creative writing                                      |
| merit      | <i>develop</i> idea(s) with detail in a piece of creative writing                                      |
| excellence | <i>develop</i> idea(s) <i>convincingly</i> with detail in a piece of creative writing [italics added]. |

One can only pity the poor teacher whose job it is to make sense of these criteria. No definition is given of the fuzzy word ‘convincingly’; somehow the teacher must decide whether a piece of work is sufficiently ‘convincing’ to be ‘excellent’. However, quite a stiff definition appears to be given of the term ‘develop ideas’: ‘to build on a single idea by adding detail, link that idea to other ideas and details, and work towards a *coherent* planned whole’ [italics added].

One wonders whether every excellent English poem really does ‘develop ideas’ in this fashion. Some of the most admired lyrics in the language are very short and impressionistic. On the other hand, perhaps

there is room for manoeuvre in our interpretation of the term ‘coherent’. The lesson seems to be that we are chasing a will-o-the-wisp. Either our criteria are simply too vague, or by attempting to specify them too closely, some ‘essence’ is lost. Teaching then becomes too narrow and formula-bound. This is not a problem that will ever be solved by the panel of experts redrafting the criteria for the umpteenth time. It is an endemic problem in any system based on assessment against ‘standards’.

As the Education Forum has commented:

The enormous effort that must have gone into trying to find the words to express the gradations of performance would have been much better spent on trying to agree on the essentials of what constitutes English at this level. ... Although it is well known that grading depends on direct comparisons, some ideological hang-up seems to hold back the Ministry and NZQA from accepting this, and hence the enormous and unnecessary effort to which the expert panels are being put.<sup>7</sup>

## **A Multitude of Problems**

There are also the more obvious difficulties connected with internal assessment. Students work on their ‘creative writing’ project over a period of time, and receive feedback from the teacher. Teachers have a vested interest in their students performing well. They will inevitably vary in the extent to which they provide useful guidance to their charges. They may also vary in other crucial ways, such as the time they allow the student to complete the assignment. There will also be variation amongst schools over a whole range of factors. This is obviously not a problem confined to English. It is a system-wide problem.

Often students will also seek help from their parents. Educated, middle-class parents are in a far better position to assist their offspring than uneducated, unsophisticated parents – widening any gaps in educational achievement.

The possibility of straight-out plagiarism also rears its head. The Internet is a ready source of material, especially for middle-class students. Websites containing pre-written essays abound. With luck and a little cunning, the right essay accompanied by only the most rudimentary Procrustean topping and tailing might pass muster for an internally assessed achievement standard – or even excel.

Also problematic is the policy of allowing students one chance to re-sit any internally assessed achievement standards failed on the first

attempt. The criteria for allowing a re-sit carry a full fog quotient: ‘sufficient learning’ needs to have taken place since the achievement standard was first attempted, and the student needs to have made ‘visible progress’.<sup>8</sup> As in so many other areas of the NCEA, there will inevitably be variation amongst teachers, and amongst schools, in how the words are interpreted.

There are numerous other problems. The student who only just misses out on a ‘merit’ or an ‘excellence’ for an achievement standard will rightly feel hard done by; there are simply too few categories to express the gradations of performance.

The fragmentation of subjects will be less extreme than under unit standards. However, there will still be arbitrary divisions, and teachers will be teaching to artificial sub-subjects.

Defenders of the NCEA make much play of the fact that a mixture of internal and external assessment is being used with achievement standards. However, for each individual achievement standard one method or the other is used, with no cross-moderation and each standard reported separately. Experts have argued that this increases the overall error in assessment.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the claim that the NCEA will provide better information on student achievement simply cannot be sustained. The NCEA will provide many more squiggles on paper. Indeed, it will produce an enormous number of squiggles. If these marks have little meaning, however, they will not add up to a satisfactory overall assessment of a person’s achievement in a subject. Much of the ‘information’ provided will be unintelligible to users. For instance, how many employers will understand the differences between all nine English level 1 achievement standards listed earlier?

Thus the statement by the Ministry of Education that the reader of a student’s NCEA ‘would know exactly what a student knows and can do within a subject, and would know which subjects and what parts of the subject the student is very good at, or otherwise’,<sup>10</sup> is not just an exaggeration. It is pure fantasy.

Problems with teacher workload will be less acute than if the nightmare of unit standards had been fully implemented. However, they should still not be underrated, particularly if:

- students often engage in re-sits of achievement standards;
- some schools are foolish enough to allow students to adopt a ‘cafeteria’

approach to their courses, such as taking just one English achievement standard;

- teachers are often confronted with students taking achievement standards at different levels in the same class.

Even maintaining all the student records safely and efficiently may constitute a major administrative cost for schools.

The students, for their part, will spend far too much time being assessed and too little time actually learning. If the old examination system was stressful, it is very hard to see how those stresses will be reduced under the NCEA.

We can be confident the NCEA will fail. It will fail to provide consistent, nationwide assessment. It will lead to employers giving increased consideration to the school a person attended, further entrenching the status of the good schools and reinforcing social differences. The NCEA may also lead to tertiary institutions setting up examinations of their own. It may lead increasingly to schools opting out of the system in favour of an internationally recognised exam – as Auckland Grammar has done. The NCEA may even become a valuable source of income to lawyers, as aggrieved students and parents seek redress through the courts.

## **Victoria Not Amused by Internal Assessment**

For a cautionary tale, we need look no further than across the Tasman. Around a decade ago, the state of Victoria introduced a new Victorian Certificate of Education. Like the NCEA, the new certificate:

- was designed to blur the distinction between academic and vocational training;
- reduced the emphasis on external examinations;
- abolished all scaling;
- introduced an untried form of moderation;
- greatly reduced the assessment scale (to five outcomes as compared to four in New Zealand).

By the end of the decade Victoria had made major changes back towards a more traditional system of assessment. The problems are not hard to guess:

- bias in grades awarded by schools;
- students cheating;
- teachers cheating;
- the cost to schools in resources and teacher time;
- the cost to students in reduced learning time and assessment workload;
- the cost of the bureaucracy required to maintain the system;
- difficulty in interpreting the marks owing to lack of standardisation.

And last, but not least:

- *the unfair advantage given to students from affluent backgrounds.*<sup>11</sup>

According to Australian educationist Kevin Donnelly: ‘Given the acknowledged flaws in the approach to assessment embedded in the original [Victorian Certificate of Education], it is astonishing that the New Zealand authorities are embarking on a very similar development with the NCEA.’<sup>12</sup>

## Highlanders Reel from Internal Assessment

Nothing may really astonish a seasoned observer of the educational scene in New Zealand. But the point is very well made. Achievement standards were not even trialled in this country before introduction. A cautionary tale from Scotland further reinforces the nature of the risks we are running. In 2000 Scotland moved to a system of assessment for post-compulsory education with uncomfortable similarities to developments in New Zealand. The new ‘Higher Still’ regime saw much greater use of internal assessment, and a unified record of qualifications across the ability range. Unfortunately, the first year of introduction of the new

system was a complete fiasco, marked by long delays in receiving results, many results that were patently incorrect, an unprecedented number of appeals, aggrieved students and parents up and down the country, a political storm, and the resignation of the head of the organisation overseeing the new system.<sup>13</sup> There were many complaints about the complexity of the regime and the bureaucracy required to run it. Perhaps the new Scottish system will settle down over the next few years. The omens are scarcely encouraging.

Given such precedents one can appreciate why Michael Irwin talks of ‘the extraordinarily irresponsible way in which we embark in New Zealand on system-wide educational experiments’.<sup>14</sup> One can also appreciate former secondary school teacher Jan Kerr’s scathing view about the poor quality of the educational policy debate in this country. Kerr spent several years at the Reserve Bank before moving out again to the educational world to head the Independent Schools Council:

Returning to education I was struck by the amazing lack of rigour in the debate. In central banking one had been used to a certain standard of proof. Back in education it was apparent that often what passed for research was really just assertion. In a strange way, it was almost as though they do not want rigour – that they perceive it to be somehow anti-education. It is almost as if they believe that simply being touchy-feely is enough.<sup>15</sup>

We arrived where we are now because we took off on a wild-goose chase to define the indefinable, found it unattainable, then needed to find a compromise. It is not a good place to end up.

As far as one can make out, the single most important justification for unit standards in the eyes of ‘progressive’ educationists was that under the new system a less intelligent student was more likely to feel good about herself. Instead of thinking, ‘I got only 35 per cent in school certificate English: I must be really stupid’, she would now be able to point to what she had achieved. We have already seen that the status of self-esteem among the educational establishment is far from warranted by the evidence. Taking this concern at face value, however, how much better about herself would that very same student feel under the NCEA? Would she really think: ‘I got three credits in English. I must have a lot going for me as a person’, then exhibit a surge of socially adjusted behaviour as she began helping old ladies across the road and campaigning to save the whale. Would not that same student rather think: ‘I only scraped three credits in English. Others in my class got far more than

me – often with merits or excellences. And two of my credits were on the second try, when Mr Snowedunder probably took pity on me. I must be really stupid’.

At the end of the day there is something extraordinarily patronising – even snobbish – about the attitude of some educationists towards such students. Being bright academically is not everything. Moreover, knowing that you are not bright academically is not the worst thing in the world. One can still be honest, reliable, punctual, diligent and kind. One can still be a valued employee in a wide range of jobs. There should be nothing undignified about any honest occupation. We need cleaners, plumbers, labourers, car mechanics and factory workers – more, perhaps, than we need certain educationists. The fact that society does give higher status to certain occupations is not something schools can hide from their senior students.



## PART 5

# MONOPOLY MISERIES



## The De-professionalisation of Teachers

### **Why Those Who Can, Don't Teach**

To a large extent the quality of an education system depends on the quality of its teachers. Teaching in New Zealand today is a beleaguered profession. It has comparatively low social status, and it fails to attract good people in large enough numbers – particularly men. Perhaps it has long been thus, but there are reasons for believing the problem has grown worse.

One reason is the much greater range of career options now facing capable school leavers. This is simply a fact of the modern world. But a variety of much more preventable circumstances also conspire to deter potential teachers:

- The whole trend towards a teacher being a 'facilitator' rather than an imparter of knowledge. If you know a subject, love that subject, believe in its enduring relevance, and wish to teach it to young minds, you might be less than thrilled when told that your job is not to transmit your knowledge, but to embark with your pupils on a touchy-feely journey of discovery. What – you might ask – was the point of all your study at university, if teaching is no more than this?
- The growing disciplinary problems in many New Zealand classrooms. 'Progressive' educationists have created a climate in which disruptive students seem to have more rights than other students or the teachers whose classes they disrupt. With the authority of the teacher weakened, teaching is inevitably rendered less attractive.

- The demands made by internal assessment, which will rise sharply under the NCEA. These are not just the more obvious demands on a teacher’s time. They are also the emotional demands involved with sitting in judgement on people you know personally – stresses that will be all the greater since the NCEA rulebook itself is so unclear. Previously, teacher and pupil had largely been working together against the external examiner.

## Education College Follies

Another reason not to be a teacher is that one thereby escapes having to spend a year or more at a college of education. These institutions constitute a large part of the problem with New Zealand schools. Most of the educational philosophies criticised in this book are promoted vigorously by our colleges of education – the downgrading of knowledge; the airy-fairy ‘teaching’ methods; the neglect of our western heritage; and the political agenda – often with considerable dogmatism.

A few years ago Geoffrey Partington undertook a comprehensive study of New Zealand’s colleges of education. He found:

- A frequent lack of intellectual rigour in courses. At the Auckland College of Education:
  - ... there was a lot of “babywork”, with feedback, which was very little in most courses, being given in format and language suitable for young children. One postgraduate student-teacher was given a green “Well Done Certificate” for having handed in three lesson plans. Although not to the same extent as the primary and early childhood students, secondary students spent considerable time on “trusting games” such as falling back into another person’s arms and being guided blindfold across a room full of obstacles. Brainstorming and the planning of content-free lessons were explained over and over.<sup>1</sup>
- Courses that often came close to ideological indoctrination. Reading lists were sometimes wholly dominated by left-wing or even Marxist figures, with little countervailing balance.
- Little emphasis on actual subject knowledge.

More recently the picture painted of teacher training by journalist Deborah Coddington would suggest that our colleges of education have

become only marginally less dismal, if at all.<sup>2</sup> One teacher is reported as saying she spent much of her time putting up with ‘PC crap’, which she was not encouraged to question. ‘Basically you shut up and get through.’<sup>3</sup>

This trend is familiar enough elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon world. The distinguished British philosopher Roger Scruton has written of how knowledge and love of one’s subject became de-emphasised in British colleges of education:

More important for the colleges were ideological conformity, attitude training, and the child-centred teaching methods which ensure that knowledge will not be transmitted in any case, even if the teacher possesses it. Knowledge was driven out of the system, and replaced by professional criteria designed to prevent the competent, the enthusiastic, the politically incorrect – in short, anyone who might threaten the complacent mediocrity of the state system – from entering the profession.<sup>4</sup>

In America Thomas Sowell writes similarly that: ‘[US compulsory education courses] are negative barriers, in the sense that they *keep out the competent*. It is Darwinism stood on its head, with the *unfittest* being most likely to survive as public school teachers’ [italics in the original]<sup>5</sup>.

Thus for a whole range of reasons – and not just salaries – too few good people end up being attracted to teaching in New Zealand. Entry standards for colleges of education are correspondingly low. Too many teachers end up with insufficient grasp of their subject.

Part of the problem is also that in recent years the educational establishment has strongly pushed for *quantity* of teachers, and *quality* has inevitably suffered. There was a big drive for lower class sizes in schools, and especially in primary schools. If we reduce class sizes we obviously need more teachers. Evidence that class size is a major factor in school achievement is mixed, to say the very least.<sup>6</sup> But the implementation of lower class sizes led to an intensified search for anyone who could be lured into the classroom. Teacher quality suffered.

## ‘All Out Lads!’ – The Teacher Unions

After submitting to her compulsory training the good potential teacher lands in an antediluvian industrial relations environment, where the mediocre are protected and the good discouraged. Even when the Employment Contracts Act was transforming labour relations in the private sector, teachers remained on detailed, centrally negotiated salaries

and conditions. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), which represents primary teachers, and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), had by the 1990s become two of the most powerful unions in the country.

There is nothing wrong with unions per se: private sector unions played a responsible role under the Employment Contracts Act. The problems come when unions are given monopoly powers – when employers are forced to deal with unions, or to bargain collectively, whether they want to or not. The union will then attempt to use its powers to extract maximum resources for its members – resources which must come from other groups in society.

Most New Zealanders appreciate that when well-paid vets strike at a highly inconvenient time for farmers, or watersiders carve out grossly-inefficient work practices for themselves, or airline pilots start rolling stoppages just when the holiday season is getting underway, these uses of monopoly power are utterly contrary to the general welfare. However, there seems a greater reluctance to apply standards of common sense to the behaviour of our teacher unions – a reluctance to appreciate that by definition the interests of teacher unions and the interests of school children will often differ. By retaining centralised wage bargaining for teachers, governments permitted industrial relations in education to remain stuck in a time warp. The teacher unions were allowed to adopt the screeching demeanour of militant organised labour, with strikes, demonstrations, working-to-rule and rolling stoppages. They also jealously guarded their role in centralised bargaining. Owing to the cosy cartel between government and unions:

- It is difficult to sack a bad teacher. It used to be virtually impossible, short of the type of scandalous misbehaviour that would titillate readers of a British tabloid newspaper. Yet from our own school days we all remember lazy or incompetent teachers. If a principal has a bad teacher in his school, often his best hope is to see that person shift elsewhere – eventually. Various devious strategies can be employed to that end. Needless to say, playing ‘pass the parcel’ does not solve the problem for the system as a whole. The children suffer. Competent and conscientious teachers end up subsidising the lazy and the useless.
- Centrally determined salaries and conditions lead to shortages in key areas. For instance, there has long been a shortage of good maths and science teachers. There can also be regional shortages of teachers.

- There is only a weak connection between pay and performance. Many good teachers are underpaid, while bad teachers are overpaid.

The education establishment sees it rather differently. The Employment Contracts Act was regarded as extreme ‘new right’ legislation and the industrial relations system covering teachers something to be clung to at all costs. They wrote sentences such as: ‘[Under the Employment Contracts Act] labour is no longer something which required the complexity of political relationships, but is clearly established as a commodity – a subject for economic exchange in the market treated the same way as a meat carcass, baked beans or wool’.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps I am missing something. When the Employment Contracts Act was in force, when visiting the supermarket I do not recall coming upon rows of human beings stacked neatly on the shelves, with \$2.95 stamped on their foreheads. On the contrary, the benefits of that legislation for jobs, staff training, industrial harmony, workplace flexibility, and productivity, have been abundantly documented.<sup>8</sup> There were losers under the Act, but more winners overall.

## **The Ideology of Militant Organised Labour**

It is a characteristic of labour monopolies that they vigorously resist attempts to introduce more competition into any system – for the most obvious of reasons. One teacher unionist recently described flexibility and choice as the ‘F’ and ‘C’ words of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> He wasn’t joking. Almost anything which gave parents more choice, or schools more flexibility, seemed to be anathema to the teacher unions, which often put up the most flagrantly specious arguments in opposition. Thus the teacher unions opposed the abolition of zoning, which increased parental choice within the state sector. They opposed the introduction of the Targeted Individual Entitlement (TIE) scheme, which paid for a limited number of poor children to attend private schools of their choice. That scheme may have been a success in the eyes of the children and their families,<sup>10</sup> but it was opposed by the teacher unions.

The unions also waged a long and successful battle against the bulk funding of teacher salaries in state schools. It is almost axiomatic that decisions on how resources are to be spent should be made by those best placed to make the relevant judgements. In the case of a school, the people best placed to decide the mix of teachers employed are clearly the school principal and, ultimately, the board – not bureaucrats in

Wellington. Operational expenditure had already been bulk-funded under the Tomorrow's Schools reforms. Had the last government simply mandated bulk funding of salaries for state schools, such a policy would have come to seem so natural that it is doubtful it would ever have been reversed by a future administration. But instead the Government chose the timid strategy of first trialling a scheme, then allowing schools to opt in, then, as opposition continued, attempting to bribe schools financially.

Schools contemplating bulk funding often had to run the gauntlet of fierce union resistance, with industrial action up and down the country. The Education Review Office<sup>11</sup> gave a broadly positive verdict on bulk-funded schools, as did a report commissioned by the Ministry of Education.<sup>12</sup> In the end government wimpishness lost out to union doggedness; the shift had still not been completed when the change of government allowed the policy to be reversed with comparatively little political damage.

This simple example illustrates the damage strong and militant teacher unions can inflict on education. This is far from confined to New Zealand. America has seen many trends since the early 1960s of which the educational establishment in this country would heartily approve. Per pupil expenditure has risen enormously. Pupil–teacher ratios have fallen. The power of the teacher unions has mushroomed: while there were no teachers in collective bargaining units in 1960, the great majority of US teachers are now covered by such units. Unfortunately, as we noted in Chapter 1, test scores of school leavers have plummeted horribly over that same period. In itself, that could be passed off as an unlucky coincidence. However, sophisticated statistical studies suggest that teacher unionisation does harm school achievement.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a major American study of over 400 schools found the single biggest factor behind a well-organised school to be the degree to which it possessed operating independence. Successful schools tended to be free from pressures both from the education bureaucracy and from teacher unions.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, the teacher unions in New Zealand supported the recent move to raise the school leaving age to 16. Such a policy led directly to increased demand for teachers. Whether good teachers were likely to be encouraged in the long run by having to cope with a new influx of bored and restless 15-year-olds, many of whom were much larger than they were, was highly debatable. Whether the new policy advanced the interests of the young people themselves, their classmates, the taxpayer, industry, or any other identifiable group other than the teacher unions, is almost as debatable.

The establishment of a teacher education council in New Zealand to replace the Teacher Registration Board seems unlikely to improve matters radically. The new body is charged with registering teachers, setting standards for the profession, hearing complaints against teachers and dismissing incompetent teachers, among other roles. Given the membership of the council, it would seem unlikely to take a genuinely critical view of teaching standards and the problem of incompetent teachers. The council is heavily dominated by the teacher unions, existing teachers and other members of the education establishment. As the Education Forum put it: ‘There is every reason to fear that the arsonists will be appointed to lead the fire brigade’.<sup>15</sup>

In New Zealand the teacher unions have become, if anything, more extreme in their political stance over the last generation. Today the unions spend a great deal of time blaming ‘society’ for the problems in our schools. The political stripe of the NZEI can be gauged from its recent extraordinary suggestion that the Maori language be made compulsory in schools. We can all approve when school children display a genuine desire to learn Maori: the Maori heritage is part of New Zealand. Making Maori compulsory would be a wholly different matter. Quite apart from the practical difficulties involved in training all those teachers, it is hard to imagine a more certain recipe for European and Asian backlash, and for growing racial tension: children would be compelled to learn a language spoken in no other country on earth, and whose literature to date is minimal to say the least.

As for the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), a few years ago Phil Raffills commented that in the 1970s he was ‘proud to be a teacher and happy to be a member of the PPTA, because it was a professional organisation. It’s completely lost its direction in the past 25 years. ... It’s a union now, as much a union as the Engineers’ Union’.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, much of the problem is that the teacher unions today represent existing teachers – not potential teachers or teachers as they might have developed had they been placed in a more favourable environment. Many teachers know deep down that the schools in which they teach are not performing. Some know deep down that they themselves are not performing. Many teachers are also insufficiently versed in the subjects they are teaching. They naturally fear competition – from people with different qualifications, and from schools where things are done differently. It all leads to a shrill defensiveness on the part of the unions.

Thus a wide variety of compounding circumstances have led to the doleful fact that our teachers, *as a class*, are under-educated, over-politicised, over-stressed, over-obstructive and under-performing.

## The Logic of Choice – A Dialogue

Two old friends of mine, Chardin and Adam, enjoy regular long arguments about public affairs.

Footnotes sometimes appear in Adam's conversation because he is well-read and cautious about making statements he cannot substantiate. There are no footnotes in Chardin's dialogue. Though he has passionate and sincere views about many things, he is much vaguer when it comes to backing up his claims.

I was recently present when the subject of school choice came up – the policy of giving parents the freedom to choose schools by allowing funding to follow the child, either within the state sector or to the private sector. Under full choice, all schools meeting the minimum criteria – whether public or private – would be funded on a broadly equal basis.

I have always been favourably inclined towards school choice. Rather than simply write a chapter advocating choice, I took down the gist of the dialogue between Adam and Chardin. As far as I can recall, this is how it went:

Chardin: I see one of your far right loonies was in the media last week advocating education vouchers. I mean, can you imagine!

Adam: Happy to discuss school choice, but it is rather misleading to keep calling it 'vouchers' in this day and age. When the word was used first by Milton Friedman in the early 1960s,

he naturally imagined a piece of paper that a parent could literally present to a school.<sup>1</sup> These days it would mostly be done electronically.

Chardin: You can call it the Thomas the Tank Engine policy for all I care. It won't change the reality. I mean the idea of parents shopping around for schools is just so extreme. Who, except for a few nutters, could possibly buy the notion?

Adam: Many parents shop around for schools already. And I do recall a survey by Heylen Research Centre in which more New Zealanders supported equal taxpayer funding for public and private schools than were opposed.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the electorate is rather more extreme than you imagine.

Chardin: Don't make me laugh. The moment anybody tried to bring in open-slasher choice, people would soon realise that it was a complete experiment. No other country has anything remotely like it.

Adam: Not really true. Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland have long had a policy of broadly equal funding for public and private schools. And many other countries have much higher subsidies to private schools than we have here. Sweden recently began subsidising private schools to the value of 85 per cent of government schools. These countries do not fit your image of far-right loonies. In fact you were once quite fond of Sweden as a social laboratory. Even in New Zealand we already have choice at the pre-school level – funding essentially follows the child. And at the tertiary level funding also generally follows the student.

Chardin: Prove to me that school choice could possibly work here.

Adam: I can't do that because in social science you rarely get absolute proof. All you can do is look at the overall evidence and make an unbiased judgement. The advocates of choice have two main arguments. One is that competition between schools would raise overall standards. I hear you snorting, but competition in virtually all areas of economic life does

appear to raise standards. The other main argument is that children vary enormously in all manner of personal characteristics – from the child with special artistic talent to the child with a special learning difficulty. Allowing parents to choose schools would make it more likely children will go to a school that suits them.

Chardin: You're already talking the language of markets. And we all know that markets are associated with greater inequality.

Adam: Markets are certainly associated with inequality. But then so is every other social system, with markets far from being the worst. Our current non-market education system hardly represents equality: the rich go to the best schools.

Chardin: It is this idea that you can blandly talk about education as if it is a tin of sardines that amazes me. I am not a loony leftie. I accept that competition can be good. But not for education.

Adam: So I don't have to persuade you that when Roger Douglas corporatised state trading organisations like the Post Office, and opened them up to competition, New Zealanders were the winner.

Chardin: You don't have to persuade me. Roger Douglas did some good things, though of course he went way too far.

Adam: I won't dwell on your opinion at the time, and count that as a gain.

Chardin: But look, parents aren't in a position to choose schools. They are not the experts.

Adam: A free society allows parents to choose virtually everything else. We allow them to choose careers, select marriage partners, have children, buy houses, buy health insurance for their families, and make decisions about all manner of other things. Better-off parents choose schools already by purchasing houses in neighbourhoods with good schools, or

by going private. We also give parents huge discretion over how they choose to bring up their children in the earliest years of childhood. What is it about formal education that means parents are suddenly incapable of choosing?

Chardin: Think of the information problems facing parents. How can they tell a good school?

Adam: Presumably by looking at a variety of factors. By monitoring their own child. By talking to the teachers. By talking to other parents. By talking to other children who attend the school. By looking at exam results, if it is a secondary school. By reading the Education Review Office reports. By attending various school events, to gauge the general atmosphere. Obviously none of this information is perfect. But neither should it be underrated.

Chardin: I'm not talking about people like you or me. I'm thinking of the poor. How can you expect them to have the motivation or sophistication to choose schools, when many of them are struggling just to make ends meet?

Adam: Isn't that a rather patronising view? After all, under the Targeted Individual Entitlement scheme, before it was abolished, less well-off parents were lining up to give their children the chance of attending a private school. Many people like you had said that nobody from South Auckland would be interested in attending a private school because they would feel ashamed of their social origins. In the end, the scheme was well oversubscribed. If you believe the poor are so unsophisticated, it's a wonder you allow them to buy houses for themselves. Or vote in general elections. Casting a vote is a very complicated business. If the poor cannot choose schools, perhaps the extension of the franchise was all a mistake.

Chardin: You can't be serious.

Adam: I'm making a serious point. Remember also that having choice will encourage less academic parents to take a greater interest in their child's education. They have little incentive

at the moment. Polly Williams, who pushed school choice through the Wisconsin state legislature, emphasises this point strongly – that when the poor are treated with dignity by being regarded as capable of making decisions for themselves, they respond.

Chardin: This Williams woman sounds like some ghastly patronising old Republican toff.

Adam: She is actually a black Democrat, and a former welfare mother, who concluded that the public schools were failing the poor.

Chardin: But the poor simply do not bring the same resources into the education marketplace. That is the crux of the matter. The whole premise of a market approach is that everyone comes to the education market with equal knowledge, and with equal ability to act on it. That is nonsense. The poor are certainly not in that position.

Adam: I agree that the poor are not in that position, but you have simply set up a straw man. No respectable advocate of choice has ever stated that the poor bring the same knowledge and power to education as the rich. They certainly don't under the current system of zoning and low subsidies to private schools. The rich have the best schools now. The question is: which system gives the poor more power? Presumably it is school choice, since they would then have direct purchasing power, and more options. They would gain more than the rich.

Chardin: But you surely won't deny that there are hopeless parents who don't give a stuff about their children's education, and are too blotto to know a ladies finishing academy from a massage parlour. They won't compare schools. What will happen to their kids?

Adam: That's a new watch you're wearing. Shop around for it long?

Chardin: You always change the subject when you are losing the

argument! Actually I lost my old watch, and was short on time, so went straight into a department store and bought this. You know how it can be sometimes.

Adam: Far from losing the argument, this merely illustrates my point. You don't have to be a sophisticated consumer to benefit from choice. A commercial enterprise that sold bad watches would not be around for long. So long as there are sophisticated consumers who do find it worth the while to shop around – and believe me there are – virtually everyone benefits from competition. Probably you would have got a slightly better deal by searching a little longer. But it is unlikely you would have ended up with as suitable a watch if the Government had a semi-monopoly in watch production, and produced a limited range. Thus I would not deny that there are parents who are totally unfit to choose schools. But it is still hard to see how their children would be worse off under choice. Their kids probably go to bad schools already.

There is evidence that even a limited degree of competition raises standards. For instance, some American cities have a large number of public school districts, while others have very few. More school districts should mean more chance to shift house into a district with better public schools – in other words, more choice. One ingenious study found that even this amount of choice had a significant impact on test scores and students' earnings as young adults.<sup>3</sup>

Such a study is not alone. A recent survey of the relevant research found the results to be 'strikingly consistent':<sup>4</sup> almost without exception competition improved academic performance in US public schools, and lowered expenditure. This was true whether the competition faced by a school came from private schools or from other public schools.

Chardin: We're not talking about average effects. We're talking about some schools entering a spiral of decline as motivated parents send their children elsewhere and the morale of the staff plummets. Think of the teachers employed in these schools. Think of the children remaining. We often

saw that result after zoning had been abolished in the New Zealand state sector. Many schools struggled severely.

Adam: Let's not get sidetracked by empathising with teachers in bad schools. The whole point of a school is to serve the needs of children. That is why advocates of choice typically insist that ultimately a school losing numbers should close. Perhaps not enough bad state schools were made to close after zoning had been abolished. Perhaps under full choice we would do well to have some very proactive mechanisms for dealing with poor schools with falling rolls. At least those who leave a struggling school are clearly better off. And the greater the degree of competition, the more likely a declining school will be made to shape up or ship out. That is one reason why there should be full choice between state and private schools.

Chardin: You still don't understand what I am saying. When bright and motivated students leave a struggling school, it hurts the children remaining.

Adam: Though that is often the claim, these so-called peer effects are not well understood. Perhaps having bright kids in a class helps the less bright ones. But perhaps their evident superiority actually causes the slower ones to lose heart, and streaming by ability enables the teacher to better pitch her material to the ability of the class. I do know that the most rigorous New Zealand study found peer effects to be comparatively small over and above the characteristics of the students as individuals.<sup>5</sup> Certainly students who are allowed to be genuinely disruptive will harm others. But then these pupils will always need to be somewhere in the system. Perhaps special schools for many of them is the answer. That is one possibility that might develop naturally under choice – particularly if choice is extended to private schools. Don't forget also that many of the children in the failing schools would continue to know personally children who had gone elsewhere: in many cases they would still be neighbours. Their superior school performance might act as a spur for others to join them.

Chardin: You keep talking about private schools. But there is no evidence that private schools are any better than state schools.

Adam: There is actually plenty of evidence that private schools perform better.

Chardin: And it takes no great genius to see why. They can afford to spend much more than state schools.

Adam: I understand that in America private schools actually cost less.

Chardin: But surely it is the background of the children that go to private schools which makes all the difference.

Adam: Even when as many factors as possible are taken into account, such as the background of the children, most studies still find that children attending private schools perform better. Have you heard of the research undertaken by Chubb and Moe on over 400 American schools?<sup>6</sup>

Chardin: Sound like a couple of safe-crackers.

Adam: Their study found that private schools outperformed state schools because they were generally better organised, not because they selected more able students.

Chardin: University of Chicago extreme right-wingers, no doubt.

Adam: That research was actually published by the left-leaning Brookings Institution. Another major American study of over 1,000 high schools also found that private schools outperformed public schools.<sup>7</sup> In fact, in America the Catholic schools are so consistently superior to government schools that many parents who are not Catholic send their children to one. A recent study that controlled for a large variety of social factors found that the positive impact of Catholic schools was huge for poor ethnic minorities, and tapered off strongly as one went up the socio-economic

scale.<sup>8</sup> Another study of maths achievement in five countries, which included New Zealand, found private schools generally performing better, as they did here, but government restrictions on their decision-making powers had the potential to seriously curtail that advantage.<sup>9</sup>

Chardin: But think of the class barriers that greater private education could lead to. Choice could destroy the state education system.

Adam: That is unlikely. Good state schools would be able to meet competition from private schools, so long as they had the flexibility to respond. If choice really destroyed the state system, that would suggest the system had been failing generations of New Zealand children. The irony is that many of the people who preach public education send their own children to private schools. I remember Mike Moore once saying that at a Labour branch meeting he was surprised to find that half those present had their children at private or integrated schools.<sup>10</sup> Come to think of it, where do young Jeremy and Felicity go?

Chardin: Look, you can't blame me for wanting the best for my children. But the state schools are so under-funded. I'm quite prepared to pay higher taxes to improve the state system. I'm no hypocrite like the members of the New Right.

Adam: I don't blame you at all for wanting the best for your children. But can I assume that if the government promised to increase funding for the state system, you would promise to return Jeremy and Felicity to your local state school?

Chardin: Now you're just being flippant. What I want is a system where choice is unnecessary because every state school is a good school.

Adam: Many intellectuals last century were convinced that basic choices and freedoms would be unnecessary when the right people were running a collectivist society. Those experiments came crashing down. I wonder at your own

confidence on this issue. And until your Utopia arrives, you give every impression of being prepared to hold the children of the poor hostage in failing schools. As Thomas Sowell asks, if that is such a good principle, why do we allow the children of the affluent to escape being used as hostages, ‘for the greater glory of social justice’?<sup>11</sup>

Chardin: This Sowell fellow is no doubt another poor black with ten starving children?

Adam: Actually Sowell *is* black, and he did grow up in a ghetto, though I doubt if he is poor now.

Chardin: But think of the practicalities of school choice. Everyone would want to send their children to certain schools, and those schools wouldn’t be able to accept them. You would have lots of disgruntled parents unable to get their sons into Auckland Grammar. We saw that after zoning was abolished.

Adam: One of the major rationales for school choice is that children are genuinely different, and different families look for different things in a school. It is true that certain schools would be popular under choice. We saw that under government choice, after zoning had been abolished. Those schools were able to expand, and that was positive. But there were limits. Sooner or later, expanding schools hit capacity constraints. And expansion remained quite a bureaucratic process for a government school. One lesson is that good schools should be given maximum freedom to grow. But good schools are not good by accident. They have a formula that presumably can be copied, at least in part. If we allowed full choice, new and existing private schools would have the chance to replicate the formula for a successful school.

Chardin: Don’t make me laugh. Under choice, private schools would only admit the easy-to-teach children from middle-class homes. Why should they admit the poor and dysfunctional?

Adam: Because the poor and dysfunctional would now have

purchasing power. It would be a most remarkable market where a demand did not bring forth a response. In America there are already private education companies that operate schools mainly in low-income neighbourhoods.<sup>12</sup> And they do not yet have anything like full school choice in the US. I'm not suggesting private companies would necessarily play a big role in New Zealand under school choice: we simply do not know. But we do know that many schools would be wanting to admit low-income students for the simple reason that their survival would be at stake.

Remember too that just as schools with the poorest student intake in New Zealand qualify for higher funding, the poorest pupils could qualify directly for a higher entitlement under school choice. Exactly the same is true for children with identified special needs: they too could be given a higher entitlement.

Chardin: I still think the schools would be more segregated by class under school choice.

Adam: The honest answer is that we cannot be sure in advance precisely what would happen, since full choice would be a complex new change. We know schools are quite highly segregated already. If choice raised standards generally, and more children went to schools that suited them, and the poor received a better deal, I personally would be content to leave off fighting the class war. But *you* might be interested to know that after school choice had been introduced in Sweden, on average the incomes of families choosing private schooling turned out to be lower than the incomes of families who remained with the state sector.<sup>13</sup>

Chardin: But think of all the other equity issues. Not everyone can have choice. A family living out in the wops with only one local school doesn't have choice. Talk about choice is often nonsensical.

Adam: If choice is a good principle, it is hard to see why we should not extend that principle as far as possible: if we are making some people better off, and others no worse off, I count that

as a gain. The family living in the country would not be worse off under choice. They might even be able to afford to send their child to a boarding school. And who knows – specialist schools might start offering instruction over the Internet. How can we tell in advance the possibilities that might open up?

Chardin: But the filthy rich might top up the value of the entitlement. How would that be fair?

Adam: A free society already allows wealthy parents to buy all manner of lavish gifts for their children. It already allows them to buy them a private education, or purchase an expensive house near a highly desirable school. Again, it is hard to see how such an objection is motivated by anything other than envy of the rich – or guilt at being well off.

Chardin: How silly of me. You and your footnotes and alleged evidence and so-called studies. I had completely forgotten the Smithfield reports. They were a major study right here in New Zealand, commissioned by the Ministry of Education. They monitored the same group of schools over several years, to examine the effects of the abolition of zoning. And they demonstrated conclusively that scrapping zoning was all right for you and me, but bad for the poor. Everyone from the Minister of Education down will tell you that the Smithfield reports showed that market competition between schools increased inequality.

Adam: The authors of the Smithfield reports certainly concluded that the limited degree of ‘market competition’ represented by the abolition of zoning had been bad. But not everyone has been convinced by their findings. Have you actually read any of those reports?

Chardin: Who needs to?

Adam: Perhaps you can tell me their actual empirical results.

Chardin: I imagine they found that it was the middle classes who were taking advantage of choice, and that the poor and

underprivileged were not able to choose in anything like the same numbers. It's the same old story.

Adam: Actually they found that on average people whose children were going to adjacent schools had a lower socioeconomic status than those sending their children to their local school. Under zoning the reverse had been true.<sup>14</sup>

Chardin: You are choosing your words very carefully: 'adjacent schools'. I'll bet there was a big rise in the rich using schools a long distance away.

Adam: The socioeconomic status of those attending so-called distant schools did rise. But the rise was not as large as the fall in socioeconomic status for those going to adjacent schools. And since those attending distant schools were fewer in number, the poor were exercising more choice than the well-off after zoning had been abolished.

Chardin: But the segregation of schools by socioeconomic status surely rose after zoning was scrapped.

Adam: Not according to the Smithfield authors' own measure of overall socioeconomic segregation. Schools were less segregated at the end of the period than at the beginning.<sup>15</sup>

Chardin: Okay, but Maori must have been seriously left behind. With their history of oppression, they wouldn't have been able to exercise choice nearly as much as Europeans.

Adam: Actually it is a very similar story to socioeconomic status. Under zoning a smaller percentage of Maori than Europeans had been going outside their local school. After de-zoning more Maori than Europeans were doing that.<sup>16</sup>

Chardin: Perhaps schools became more segregated by ethnic group.

Adam: The index calculated for ethnic segregation did increase. But by the Smithfield authors' own admission, this was due mainly to Maori students starting to enrol in one school

that was beginning to market itself as bi-cultural.<sup>17</sup> The Smithfield authors support Maori being able to choose schools that emphasise Maori culture.<sup>18</sup>

Chardin: But they must have found *something*.

Adam: More Chardonnay while you think?

Chardin: Yes please. Perhaps they found that those who exercised choice had high socioeconomic status *for their neighbourhood*.

Adam: Congratulations. They did find that<sup>19</sup>.

Chardin: That is what I meant all along.

Adam: Of course. But it hardly seems sufficient to justify an overall conclusion that abandoning zoning had led to greater social polarisation. Two British writers, reviewing the Smithfield conclusions wrote rather tartly – and I have their actual words on me: ‘If it is true that observers are writing of the “negative effects of choice, before clear evidence of them is at hand”, perhaps they will continue to do so even after evidence of the opposite is at hand.’<sup>20</sup>

Chardin: But the Smithfield authors are respected academics in their field.

Adam: Perhaps you should draw your own conclusions about that. Certainly Australian consultant Mark Harrison, in a detailed analysis of the Smithfield reports, found them riddled with shortcomings: a straw-man version of the supposed ‘market model’; major flaws in the empirical work; and policy recommendations that did not follow from the analysis.<sup>21</sup> The Harrison critique constitutes a fairly complete demolition of any intellectual pretensions the Smithfield reports might have. You may appreciate why Jan Kerr, who spent eight years at the Independent Schools Council, will tell people that the analysis in the Smithfield reports was ‘just a load of rubbish’, and that it was astonishing the government had spent good money on it.<sup>22</sup>

- Chardin: Look, I didn't bring up the Smithfield reports. You brought up the Smithfield reports. I was talking about all the practical problems facing school choice. Schools would have to spend more on advertising.
- Adam: You were complaining before that parents would have too little information. Advertising can help remedy that. Manufacturers of tinned sardines have to spend money on advertising. But that doesn't mean we would produce tinned sardines more effectively if they were all produced by the government, and everyone had to shop at the closest government supermarket – the one they were zoned for.<sup>23</sup>
- Chardin: But education is too important to be left to the private sector. It is absolutely vital.
- Adam: You could equally argue that education is too important to be left to the government. Nothing is more important than food: if you don't eat, you don't live. But we don't conclude that the government should take over food production – not unless we are North Korea, where food production is such a success that the people have sometimes been reported attempting to eat grass.
- Chardin: Taken to its extreme, school choice could lead to bigger and bigger schools, even perhaps ending up with one per city. No – don't laugh.
- Adam: It's hard not to. That is the funniest of all the objections to school choice that I have ever heard. You've been reading *Otago Daily Times* editorials haven't you?<sup>24</sup> Some of them can seriously damage your brain. When we look at private schools, we don't see one large school per city. For one thing, it is possible for a school to get too big. And parents are not all looking for the same type of school. Children are different. In most private markets, left to themselves, we rarely see one monopoly player emerging.
- Chardin: But under choice, fringe schools might spring up teaching outlandish courses. There might be a school teaching just rugby, or scientology, or astrology – or even ...

Adam: You've gone pale.

Chardin: ... Even New Right economics.

Adam: If that is a genuine concern, we can still require schools to teach a basic national curriculum. We might wish to debate what should be in the curriculum. But that is a completely separate question.

Chardin: Surely under full choice Maori would miss out. European parents wouldn't want their children mixing with Maori. Racism would rear its ugly head. There would be white flight.

Adam: I trust that you are exempting yourself from this wholesale condemnation of parents. You aren't racist, are you?

Chardin: Of course not. How could you even think such a thing?

Adam: And I trust you are also exempting me?

Chardin: I've called you many names over the years, but never a racist.

Adam: It is always other people whom we fear might be racist – the untutored masses somewhere out there, who don't have our education and class.

Chardin: You're taking the mickey again.

Adam: Look. I firmly believe that most New Zealanders are like us: they treat people on their merits and want their children mixing with other social groups. There are a few racists around. But it would be silly to design the whole system around them.

Chardin: But we've had market reforms before – in health. *They* didn't work. They were a complete disaster. Why should we expect them to work in education?

Adam: If you're referring to the health reforms under the Bolger Government, you should at least recognise that in the end

those policies provided New Zealanders with virtually no more choice. The strategy in the Mother of All Budgets *had* been to allow New Zealanders to take their share of government funding and use it to purchase a private-sector health plan, if they chose to.<sup>25</sup> That policy would have had strong similarities to school choice. But the National Party backed away from it. Incidentally, they seem to be doing something similar in Sweden these days.

Chardin: Sweden has been going down hill for a long time. And don't mention the Mother of all Budgets. You know, when that ghastly woman imposed hospital charges, I made a deliberate point, purely out of principle, of not paying mine, even though I could well afford to.

Adam: I'm sure the symbolism was much appreciated in Porirua.

Chardin: Well, I hope I've convinced you by now that school choice would never work.

Adam: Not really.

Chardin: But I gave you a thousand objections.

Adam: A thousand invalid arguments don't add up to one valid one.

Chardin: But I won every round of the argument.

Adam: That wasn't entirely my impression.

Chardin: Look, I pointed out just how extreme an idea it was.

At this point the whole conversation began again from the very beginning – Chardin making exactly the same arguments and Adam making virtually identical replies. I returned to the table after a long absence to hear,

Chardin: I hope I've convinced you by now that school choice could never work.

Adam: Not really.

Chardin: But I gave you a thousand objections.

Adam: A thousand invalid arguments don't make one valid one.

Chardin: But I won every round.

Adam: Not my impression.

Chardin: Perhaps we will just have to agree to disagree. In the end, some people are simply not amenable to rational persuasion.

– A point with which I heartily concurred.



PART 6

CONCLUSION



## Memorandum to the Minister of Education

### **Subject: *Where To Now?***

As you can see, I am making the somewhat optimistic assumption that you have read this far. Few recent ministers of education would have done so. I am further assuming that in the course of the book something like an epiphany has taken place – that it has suddenly occurred to you that perhaps the traditionalists have been right all along, and that the entire system *is* in far more of a mess than you had previously imagined. Certainly the longer in office any minister of education stays, the more apparent it becomes that simply injecting more money, while doing one's best to placate various pressure groups, looks less and less like a winning strategy. I will do you the honour of assuming that you genuinely want to improve our schools, and that you are willing to brave all the sound and fury inevitably unleashed upon you as a consequence of rational reform.

Continuing with my fantasy, I am assuming that you are genuinely interested in hearing my recommendations. Here you may suddenly be feeling very impotent. You cannot simply announce in a press release that, starting next calendar year, you are restoring more traditional schools. You sit at the top of a diverse and unwieldy set of structures that do not simply dance to your command. Wherever you look – or almost everywhere<sup>1</sup> – you see entrenched cultures that translate to mediocrity in our classrooms. You cannot simply walk through the ministry, the colleges of education, the education departments of our universities, the premises of our teacher unions, and our schools, shooting every woolly

thinker that you find, or running them out of town. The Minister of Justice might object. More to the point, most members of the educational establishment are perfectly sincere in their views. It is not that they are bad people. Yet your duty is to launch a cultural counter-revolution. For you do not represent the educational establishment. You represent New Zealand children.

## Hit Them With the ‘C’ Word

Your single greatest weapon is surely competition. Too many people in the system are insulated from the results of their own actions. Reality too rarely intrudes. School choice has two main virtues – it enables a better matching of child to school, and it injects competition into the system as a whole, thus raising standards generally. Competition will be particularly valuable when it meets an entrenched culture that is failing – the very situation in New Zealand schools. You should not be too squeamish about whom you impose competition on. New Zealand parents were never asked to approve formally the vast majority of the changes to our schools that crept in over the years. Most of those ‘reforms’ just happened, in one way or another. Parents deserve the chance to vote with their feet.

The introduction of full school choice will represent such wholesale transformation that you will inevitably strike transitional problems. In certain areas the new culture of accountability may be very slow to take hold. You must do what you can to ameliorate these problems while keeping your eye firmly on the goal – transforming the balance of power so that parents, not the education establishment, are in the driving seat.

Our colleges of education are also well overdue to feel the bracing winds of competition. There should be no requirement for a new teacher to attend such an institution, imbibing woolly ideas or dying of boredom while she plays trusting games or endlessly discusses the Treaty. Teachers almost invariably say that their most valuable pre-service training was their time spent out on ‘section’ or ‘practicum’, teaching real children in real schools. Arguably the best form of teacher training is some version of the apprenticeship of former times. If so, you would not want to prevent schools from hiring teachers on that basis. But neither should you prescribe such a solution for all. We simply do not know enough. We have already suffered from far too many dogmatic attempts to impose single ‘correct’ solutions on all our schools. Ultimately schools should

have the power to hire whoever they want. Making schools accountable, and giving them freedom to employ, is the best way of making the colleges of education themselves accountable – of ensuring they add value to the process rather than simply a large dose of obfuscation.

You should also give schools the power to bargain directly with their workforce on all significant aspects of salaries and conditions. As you have already seen, centralised wage-bargaining has led to a cosy cartel that protects the useless, discourages the enterprising, and allows powerful teacher unions to advance an agenda often sharply opposed to the interests of New Zealand schoolchildren. That needs to end.

### **Research Supports Traditionalists**

In a whole range of areas you should resist the temptation to assume that Wellington knows best, and that one solution should be imposed on everyone. You should greatly reduce the controls on our schools, not invent new ones. True, there is quite a lot of research on what makes an effective school. Most of it gives little comfort to the educational establishment. For instance, the Chubb and Moe study already mentioned found *school organisation* to be the major factor in student achievement, after the basic aptitude of the students themselves. Successful schools tended to have goals that were clear, ambitious and consistently pursued. School principals tended to exhibit strong educational leadership. They were more likely to have taken the job because they had an academic vision than because they wanted to get out of the classroom and into management. Successful schools were also characterised by greater professionalism among the staff. There was greater mutual respect, more teamwork, and more teacher independence.

In a sense, none of this comes as much of a surprise. Nor do the results of the research on over 1,000 American high schools by the highly respected sociologist James Coleman, already mentioned in the preceding chapter.<sup>2</sup> According to Coleman, the two broad areas most related to achievement were academic demands and school discipline.<sup>3</sup> He saw these characteristics as closely connected. Successful schools had firm and consistent discipline. Students did more homework. Attendance was more regular. And students took more rigorous subjects.

Another respected study of school effectiveness was based on a survey of 2,000 London primary-school children.<sup>4</sup> Various characteristics were identified as associated with effective schools:

- educational leadership
- the involvement of the deputy head
- the involvement of teachers
- consensus among teachers
- structured lessons
- intellectually challenging teaching
- a work-centred setting
- a limited number of focal points each lesson
- good communication between teachers and pupils
- record-keeping
- parental involvement
- a positive climate.

Around a decade ago Jaap Scheerens reviewed a great deal of research conducted in America, Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> He noted, not for the first time, that research attempting to link school achievement to various broad ‘inputs’ – such as teacher salaries, the quality of buildings, teacher–pupil ratios, and per-pupil expenditure – had largely failed.<sup>6</sup> However, more in-depth studies evaluating programmes devised for the educationally disadvantaged, such as Head Start, had found that those initiatives ‘which used direct, i.e., structured, teaching approaches were superior to more “open” approaches’.

Moreover, research that focused more on the internal functioning of schools:

... produced evidence that factors like strong educational leadership, emphasis on basic skills, an orderly and secure climate, high expectations of pupil achievement and frequent assessment of pupil progress were indicative of unusually effective schools ...

The overall message is that an emphasis on basic subjects, an achievement-oriented focus, an orderly school environment and structured teaching, which includes frequent assessment of progress, is effective in the attainment of learning results in the basic school subjects.<sup>7</sup>

## **Fewer Rules Rather Than More**

Thus the research on effective teaching and effective schools gives every comfort to traditionalists. In your public role as Minister of Education you should by all means proclaim loudly and clearly that ‘progressive’ educationists are bereft of evidence for the great majority of their claims. Yet you should resist the temptation to assume that all questions in education have been decided. There is still a huge amount we do not understand about effective schools. In a whole range of areas, incomplete research might give way to better research. A host of issues should be left to the test of experience – whether a given policy is successful in practice. Once again we get back to the need for school choice. As Minister, you can have your ministry and other bureaucrats decide what is good practice, and mandate it. The record is scarcely encouraging. Alternatively, good practice can be determined through competition between schools, where mistakes are less disastrous because they are not imposed on everyone, and good ideas can gradually be adopted more and more widely. It may be an untidy solution, but then we live in an untidy world.

Thus on numerous issues you should ultimately be agnostic, and leave the outcomes to be determined by choice and competition. What is the most appropriate pupil–teacher ratio in New Zealand? Personally I would be happy to see larger classes, if that meant better teachers in front of those classes. Paying good teachers more, and asking them to teach a larger number of children, would probably make the education dollar go further. However, that is just *my* opinion. You should leave the question to be decided by schools. Another example is streaming by ability. Personally I am in favour of it: if I were running a school, I would stream. But as Minister of Education, I would not wish to make streaming mandatory. I have expressed my personal scepticism about Maori immersion schools. But equally I would not want to prevent such schools from accessing government funding, so long as there was full and open information about their performance.

The recent move to make sex education compulsory smacks of precisely the type of dogmatism seen too often in past education

disasters. As even its proponents sometimes admit, the gradual introduction of sex education has not to date been accompanied by any noticeable reduction in the behaviours it has supposedly been aimed at. If anything, statistics on teenage abortions, births to unmarried teenage mothers and ex-nuptial births worsened in the 1990s. Perhaps ‘society’ is to blame for these trends – or perhaps the programmes themselves are making things worse.<sup>8</sup> The frightening thing is that nobody in the education establishment seems even to consider the second possibility. If our educationists are using the wrong method in teaching reading, what confidence do you have that they will make a brilliant success of teaching about sex and intimate relationships?

### The Curricula – Routing the Opposition

When it comes to the current curriculum documents there is little point in compromise. You have two defensible choices. You could abandon altogether the idea of a national curriculum. Alternatively, the key documents could be completely rewritten, by almost completely different people. There is no point in attempting to get ‘balanced representation’ among all the various philosophies, ideologies and special interest groups who will want to get their hands on the rewriting of the documents. The opposition need to be routed, not appeased. By all means consult fully with teachers, so that the new curricula are informed by as much feedback as possible on classroom practice. We want maximum buy-in from the people who will be implementing the documents. However, ultimate control should be in the hands of people who know and love their subject, and see education as a means of initiating the young into a cultural tradition rather than embarking on a dumbed-down, ‘socially-aware’ voyage of discovery with a hazy destination.

The new core curricula would be based on propositions that all reasonable people are agreed upon. Not everyone qualifies as a reasonable person. Criminals, Nazis, communists, anti-Semites, astrologers, people who deny the theory of evolution, and various other fringe lunatics fail the test easily. Reasonable people share large areas of agreement on many topics, from the value of open and democratic societies to the theorem of Pythagoras. And reasonable people do so while simultaneously holding sharp differences on a thousand *other* topics, from the correct level of government spending to the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi. The curriculum should be based on what we agree upon – not what divides us. It should also allow open debate on issues that do divide us. On what

other moral basis can the government compel school attendance from every child in the land?

The rewritten core curricula would abandon the quixotic attempt to define learning outcomes. Instead they would revert to the traditional ‘syllabus’ approach, with clear descriptions of what children should be taught.

On the vexed question of social studies, I firmly agree with those traditionalists who want it abolished altogether. As already noted, strictly speaking there has never been any such subject. For two generations successive ‘social studies’ curricula have largely been vehicles for spreading ignorance, complacency, and certain political views. We need to get back to teaching proper history, or proper geography, or proper economics, or proper something – some recognised subjects with a claim to comprising a legitimate body of knowledge or a distinctive technique of thinking. Even proper sociology, if taught in a balanced manner, would be preferable to ‘social studies’, though it would probably be seen as too difficult for schools, even at senior level.

## **Getting Real on Assessment**

There are arguments for not having a nationwide assessment system at all. If our key strategy is the competition of ideas in education, then there is a case for allowing alternative systems of assessment to compete side by side on an equal footing, without the government promoting any one dominant regime. We could allow each school to choose an assessment regime that it saw as best suiting the needs of its pupils. To the extent that schools were more genuinely accountable in other ways, they would be more likely to choose correctly. If an assessment system had genuine merits, it would presumably be adopted by more and more schools. Moreover, different assessment regimes for genuinely different purposes might develop.

One could also argue that the government does have a role in promoting a dominant system – that even with sufficient reforms elsewhere, a pure ‘market’ in qualifications would lead to excessive fragmentation of the system, to too many cases of fly-by-night operators selling debased or worthless pieces of paper, and thus to greater information problems for employers and others. Such a view can also be sensibly defended. What cannot be defended are the NCEA and achievement standards. Retaining a national framework must involve, for academic subjects, a return to the School Certificate and Bursary

examinations in something like their form prior to the NCEA. Moreover, given the greater number of students now leaving after the sixth form, there is a stronger case than in the past for a separate, externally moderated exam at that level.

Naturally there should be as full as possible public information on school exam results. Some schools will scream loudly about ‘school league tables’. Purely by coincidence, the objectors will virtually all be schools whose exam results are far from spectacular. As the Education Forum has written:

In England, league tables have been the greatest, and perhaps the only, lever for raising standards in the past decade. Everything else tends to be beset with jargon, vacuity, ideological capture and bureaucratic inertia leading to coagulation around an undemanding and mediocre consensus, which ends up by satisfying no one.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a good case for externally moderated testing of at least some subjects in primary schools. The introduction of testing in British primary schools has led to a modest improvement in performance,<sup>10</sup> as has testing in some American states. In New Zealand, tentative moves made in this direction were recently abandoned. They should be resurrected.

One idea not even seriously debated in New Zealand is the establishment of separate schools, and separate courses, for students of different abilities. Yet in many countries these are commonplace, including many countries of continental Europe. The Netherlands has several different types of school. Moreover, in many countries, it is common for schools to require children to repeat a year if they have not reached an adequate level of attainment. In New Zealand, of course, allowing children to progress in step with their classmates, regardless of demonstrated attainment, has been in place for many years. Holding children back, and having different schools for children of differing ability, runs counter to deeply-held dogmas in New Zealand education. On both issues we should be keeping an open mind, and allowing trial and innovation.

Having different types of school evidently runs the risk of ‘labelling’ students at too early a stage in their careers. That was the stigma of the old ‘11-plus’ exam in Britain, which determined who went to a grammar school and who to a secondary modern. But the longer students of hugely varying abilities and interests remain in one single common pool – and in New Zealand there is often no streaming by ability within schools,

either – the less likely it is that individual needs are being met. One can understand why some traditionalists argue that, at least from the fifth form, different curricula for students of different abilities really are required.

## A Final Word

Let us not misunderstand your situation. As Minister of Education, you stand at the end of 3,000 years of cultural advance by mankind. The story has broadly been one of progress – scientific, technological, social. There has been an enormous amount of struggle – with ourselves and with our environment. The ascent of man has occurred because enough people sought the truth as they saw it, and had the courage and perseverance to prevail.

By and large, and especially in recent centuries, each generation has left the world better off than the last. But no generation has successfully reinvented the world; attempts to do so have too often led to the killing fields of Cambodia or the terror that followed the French Revolution. Each generation has built on what its predecessors achieved. Even in the most ‘revolutionary’ periods of our history, when the most radical new ideas were being promoted, sufficient conservation of the past has been crucial for our advance. Western civilisation often looked back to its roots in classical Greece and republican Rome, in the struggles of the Jews and in the amazing story of Jesus of Nazareth. And Western civilisation absorbed elements from many other cultures around the world.

The past is still all around us – in the weighty tomes poured out by the presses yearly on a thousand scientific topics; in the literature and art of the past, which is more accessible now than ever before; in the fund of stories and legends accumulated by the human race; and in the knowledge that we live in a still-growing, open-ended civilisation, where the best is yet to come, but where understanding the past is crucial if we are not to repeat its mistakes.

As Minister of Education, you are one of the guardians of that tradition. The young need to be initiated into the tradition in such a way that they understand it, absorb it, and in time come to make their own contribution. Too many educators have failed in that task.

I started this book believing that perhaps school choice, or competition between schools, had been somewhat oversold in some quarters as a cure-all for our educational ills. I ended the book wondering

what other realistic options there are, once the current curricula have been sent to the shredding machine and some sanity has been restored in the area of assessment. Little else than sustained and vigorous competition can prevent the worst of the woolly-thinking mediocrity that flourishes in our classrooms from remaining deeply entrenched in New Zealand schools. And nothing less than sustained and vigorous competition can prevent the worst of the woolly thinking from returning.

Good luck for the job ahead. Given the record of your predecessors, you will need it.

# Chapter Notes

## Acknowledgements

- <sup>1</sup> This line has been shamelessly plagiarised from Fodor, J., 1975, *The Language of Thought*, New York, Thomas Y Crowell Inc., p ix.

## PART 1:

### Chapter 1: The State We're In

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- <sup>2</sup> The other countries or regions surveyed were Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Belgium, Germany, the US, French-speaking Switzerland, German-speaking Switzerland, the UK, Ireland and Poland.
- <sup>3</sup> The best known is the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) taken by high school students applying for admission to college. Other tests also showed a decline.
- <sup>4</sup> Copperman, P., 1978, *The Literacy Hoax: The Decline of Reading, Writing and Learning in the Public Schools and What We Can Do About It*, New York, William Morrow and Co., quoted with approval in National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office.
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- <sup>7</sup> The IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) survey. See Thorndike, R., 1973, *Reading Comprehension in Fifteen Countries*, New York, John Wiley.
- <sup>8</sup> The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). See *Assessing Knowledge and Skills for Life: NZ Summary Report*, Ministry of Education, December 2001.
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## PART 2

### Introduction

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- <sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education, 1993a, *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, Wellington, Learning Media, p 6.
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### Chapter 2: The Retreat from Knowledge

- <sup>1</sup> Carr, W. and Kemmis, S., 1993, Action Research in Education, in Hammersley, M., *Controversies in Classroom Research*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, Open University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Gilbert, J., 1993, Constructivism and Critical Theory, in Bell, B. (ed.), *I Know About LISP But How Do I Put It into Practice: Final Report of the Learning in Science Project (Teacher Development)*, Centre for Science and Mathematics Education Research, Hamilton, University of Waikato, p 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Cowie, B. and Bell, B., 1996, ‘Validity and Formative Assessment in the Science Classroom’, paper given at the Symposium on Validity in Educational Assessment, Dunedin, June, p 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Bell, B., 1986, The Form 1–5 Science Review – Effecting Change, *New Zealand Science Teacher*, 48, p 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Bell, B., 1991, A Constructivist View of Learning and the Draft Forms 1–5 Science Syllabus, *SAME Papers*, pp 160–161.
- <sup>6</sup> For instance, questions have been raised about whether we can completely distinguish statements that describe the world, such as ‘Russia is a cold country’, from statements that are about the meanings of words, such as ‘All bachelors are unmarried’. If we cannot, then, to at least some extent, we cannot describe the world wholly independently of the language we use; facts and meanings are mixed up with one another. See especially Quine, W., 1951, Two Dogmas of Empiricism, *Philosophical Review*, vol 60. The present author is himself agnostic on this issue.
- <sup>7</sup> Kuhn, T., 1962, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. To Kuhn a paradigm was a background set of unquestioned beliefs that a scientist worked within.

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- <sup>20</sup> Phillips, Melanie, 1996, *All Must Have Prizes*, London, Little, Brown and Company, pp 50–51.
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- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Matthews, 1995, p 124.
- <sup>23</sup> Bell, Beverley, 1992, (ed.) *I Know About LISP But How Do I Put it into Practice: Draft Report*, Centre for Science and Mathematics Education Research, Hamilton, University of Waikato, p 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Begg, Andy, ‘Learning Theories and Mathematics: A, B, C, D and E’, paper presented at the New Zealand Association of Mathematics Teachers – 6 Conference, Dunedin, 27 June–2 July 1999, p 2.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p 3.

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- 45 *ibid.*, p 9.
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- 51 Penetito, P. and Mikaere, S., 1992, 'Education in Depth to Education in Breadth: An Iwi Response to Top-Down Reforms', paper presented to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's 'Qualifications for the 21st Century' Conference at Victoria University of Wellington, 21–24 January, p 5.

## Chapter 4: The Political Agenda

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- 11 Reported in Partington, 1997, p 51.
- 12 In hunter-gatherer societies that have been observed, almost without exception men hunt and women gather. See, for instance, Ridley, 1996.
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- 14 The precise details of this lottery presumably need not concern us, so long as they are the same for both societies. Political philosophers will recognise in this thought experiment certain features from Rawls, John, 1971, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
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- 20 Sowell, 1993, p 97.
- 21 It is stated to be such in the curriculum framework document, Ministry of Education, 1993a, p 10.
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30 Partington, 1997, makes this point with respect to college of education courses.

31 Ballard, 2000.

32 Reproduced in Thatcher, M., 1993, *The Downing Street Years*, London, Harper Collins, p 626.

33 *ibid.*

34 This is true of major classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, philosophers such as John Stuart Mill, and twentieth-century figures such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman.

35 Cowie, B. and Bell, B., 1996, p 2.

36 Wright, L., 7 August 1995, Double Mystery, *The New Yorker*, p 51. See also Tellegen, A., Lykken, D., Bouchard, T., Wilcox, K., Segal, N. and Rich, S., 1988, Personality Similarity in Twins Reared Apart and Together, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 54, pp 1031–39.

37 See, for instance, Herrnstein and Murray, 1996.

38 John Codd in a letter to *The New Zealand Listener*, 7 April 1985, reproduced in Olssen, Mark (ed.), 1988, *Mental Testing in New Zealand, Critical and Oppositional Perspectives*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, p 17.

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## PART 3

### Introduction

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- 5 *ibid.*, p 9.
- 6 *ibid.*, p 8.
- 7 Reported in Partington, 1997, p 99.
- 8 Ministry of Education, 1993a, p 23.
- 9 Referred to in the Cockcroft Report, Department of Education and Science, 1982, *Mathematics Counts*, London, HMSO.
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- 2 Brooke, A., 1995, Letter to Lockwood, *Free Radical*, vol. 2, number 15.
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- 4 Ministry of Education, 1997, p 7.
- 5 Reginald Lockstone, ‘The Draft Syllabus in Social Studies’, unpublished paper.
- 6 Education Forum, August 1995, *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum: A Submission on the Draft*, Auckland, p 39. (Prepared with the assistance of Geoffrey Partington.)
- 7 Ministry of Education, 1997, p 52.
- 8 Sowell, 1993, p 95.
- 9 Ministry of Education, 1997, p 32.
- 10 *ibid.*, p 14.
- 11 *ibid.*, p 17.
- 12 Education Forum, October 1996, *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum: A Submission on the Revised Draft*, Auckland (prepared with the assistance of Geoffrey Partington), p 16.

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 14 *ibid.*, p 22.  
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 17 Forward to Education Forum, October 1996, pp xi–xii.  
 18 Ministry of Education, 1997, p 20.  
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 20 Education Forum, October 1996, p xii.

## Chapter 6: Science – Overdose of ‘Relevance’ Kills Rigour

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 5 Ministry of Education, 1993b, p 27.  
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 8 *ibid.*, p 15.  
 9 Ministry of Education, 1993b, p 10.  
 10 Matthews, 1995, p 104.  
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 13 Matthews, 1995, p 136.  
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 15 *ibid.*, p 59.  
 16 *ibid.*, p 95.  
 17 *ibid.*, p 77.  
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 19 *ibid.*, p 97.  
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 24 Callaghan, P., 21 October 1993, Ethnicity, Gender Theories Endanger Science Teaching, *The Dominion*.  
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 26 Austin, 1993.

## Chapter 7: English – Mediocrity Rules

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 4 *ibid.*, p 14.  
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 6 See, for instance, Pinker, S., 1994, *The Language Instinct*, New York, W. Morrow.  
 7 Reported in Nicholson, 2000, p 23.  
 8 Pinker, S., 1997, *How the Mind Works*, New York, Penguin Books, p 342.  
 9 For instance this parallel was drawn by Holdaway in Holdaway, 1972.  
 10 Goodman, K., 1989, Whole-language Research: Foundations and Development, *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 90, p 215.  
 11 Goodman, K., 1970, Behind the Eye: What Happens in Reading. In K. Goodman and O. Niles (eds), *Reading Process and Program*, Urbana IL, National Council of Teachers of English, p 15.  
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 13 Nicholson, 2000, p 319.  
 14 ‘This notion of a complete processing of the text fits with research which shows that good readers do not sample or skip words. They process almost every word. Also it fits with research that even the richest context does not speed up processing time very much – only about 10 per cent. Also it fits with research showing that good readers are sensitive to even slight misspellings of predictable words’, Nicholson, 2000, p 154.  
 15 Kramer, 1991, p 15.  
 16 Ministry of Education, 1999b, *Literacy Experts Group Report to the Secretary for Education*.  
 17 Education and Science Select Committee of Parliament, August 2001, *Me Panui Tatou Katoa – Let’s All Read*, report on the inquiry into the teaching of reading in New Zealand.  
 18 Ministry of Education, 1994a, p 10.

- <sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Robinson, R., 22 February 1994, Bearing the English Standard, *The Dominion*, which admits that grammar was lost in New Zealand schools in the seventies. Roger Robinson chaired the group advising the then minister of education on the new English curriculum.
- <sup>20</sup> Education Forum, April 1994, pp 28–29.
- <sup>21</sup> Ministry of Education, 1994a, p 14.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Education Forum, April 1994, pp 21–22.
- <sup>24</sup> Ministry of Education, 1992, *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Wellington, Learning Media, p 11.
- <sup>25</sup> Howson, G., August 1994, *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum, a Review*, Auckland, Education Forum, pp 17–18.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p 18.
- <sup>27</sup> Ministry of Education, 1999a, p 31.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p 5.
- <sup>29</sup> For instance, regarding students participating in taking critical action, she writes: ‘the raising of this kind of critical consciousness will create challenges to the prevailing socio-economic system which has exacerbated personal and structural inequalities in our society’, then cites left-wing commentators such as Jane Kelsey. See Tasker, 1996/97, p 194. Much more of this nature could be quoted.

## Epilogue: Widening the Gaps Revisited

- <sup>1</sup> Conversation with the author.
- <sup>2</sup> Conversation with the author.

## PART 4

### Chapter 8: The Wild-geese Chase of Unit Standards

- <sup>1</sup> Such as in the article in the *New Zealand Herald* of 5 July 2000 by Margaret Bendall, Linda Reid and Gail Thomson, principals respectively of Epsom Girls’ Grammar, St Cuthberts College and Diocesan School for Girls, headlined: Exam-based Education System Has Had its Day.
- <sup>2</sup> Hood, D., 28 July 2000, Wrong Solution to Education Problem, letter to *The Dominion*.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Levin, B., 1982, *Speaking Up*, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd, pp 60–61.
- <sup>5</sup> Smithers, A., November 1997, *The New Zealand Qualifications Framework*, Auckland, Education Forum, p 51.
- <sup>6</sup> Chamberlain, 1996, p 114, 6.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for instance, *The Economist*, 2 December 2000, Can the Kiwi Economy Fly?, p 84.

- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Smithers, 1997, p 41.  
<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* pp 43–44.  
<sup>10</sup> Irwin, M., 28 October 1999, ‘Achievement 2001’, New Zealand Council for Educational Research Examining Assessment Conference, p 7.  
<sup>11</sup> Chamberlain, 1996, p 114.

## Chapter 9: The Quagmire of the NCEA

- <sup>1</sup> ‘The National Qualifications Framework’, 1 February 1996, officials’ paper to the Cabinet Committee on Education, Training and Employment, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, number ETE (96) 4. Released under the Official Information Act.
- <sup>2</sup> Irwin, M., 1997, *The National Qualifications Framework: Where to Now?*, *ACCESS*, 16(2).
- <sup>3</sup> Scaling takes a variety of forms. Scaling between markers evens out differences in the toughness of markers. Scaling between subjects evens out differences in the toughness of different subjects. Scaling between one year and the next evens out differences in difficulty of assessment tasks for a subject from one year to the next. While this last type of scaling was said to have been already abolished for school certificate, something similar to scaling still took place until the introduction of the NCEA. Moreover, it is still difficult to see how scaling can be completely abandoned under the new regime. Most likely it will continue in various surreptitious forms.
- <sup>4</sup> No credit will receive 0, credit 2, merit 3 and excellence 4. Each achievement standard has a credit value (such as 2 or 3), which in each case will be multiplied by the relevant grade achieved to produce a mark, all of which are added together. This total is then expressed as a percentage of the maximum possible marks attainable (i.e., the total arrived at by gaining an ‘excellence’ for every achievement standard).
- <sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education and New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2000, booklet entitled *The National Certificate of Educational Achievement: An Introduction for Parents and Students*.
- <sup>6</sup> Taken from the Ministry of Education’s website: [www.education.gov.nz](http://www.education.gov.nz). Updated 18 February 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> Education Forum, 2000a, *Policy Directions for School Qualifications: A Report on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement*, Auckland, August, p 23.
- <sup>8</sup> See Mallard, T., 31 May 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Hall, Cedric, 2000, National Certificate of Educational Achievement: Issues of Reliability, Validity and Manageability, in Livingston, I. (ed.), 2000, *New Zealand Annual Review of Education 9: 1999*, School of Education, Victoria University; and the article by Warwick Elley, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Canterbury, in the *New Zealand Education Review* of 17 November 2000.

- <sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education, July 2000, *National Certificate of Educational Achievement: Frequently Asked Questions*.
- <sup>11</sup> Brown, T. and Ball, S., 1992, *A Report on the VCE Verification Process*, Melbourne, the Victorian Board of Studies.
- <sup>12</sup> Donnelly, K., August 2000, *New Zealand's National Certificate of Educational Achievement: An International Perspective*, Auckland, Education Forum, p 16.
- <sup>13</sup> See McKay, Jenny, 2001, How It Was that Exam Results Became the Talk of the Steamie, *Critical Quarterly*, volume 43, no. 1, Spring.
- <sup>14</sup> Conversation with the author.
- <sup>15</sup> Conversation with the author.

## PART 5

### Chapter 10: The De-professionalisation of Teachers

- <sup>1</sup> Partington, 1997, p 51.
- <sup>2</sup> Coddington, D., February 2001, Teach the Teachers Well?, *North & South*.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p 25, 26.
- <sup>4</sup> Preface to Partington, 1997, p xv.
- <sup>5</sup> Sowell, 1993, p 26.
- <sup>6</sup> See for instance Hanushek, Eric, 1986, The Economics of Schooling: Production and Efficiency in Public Schools, *Journal of Economic Literature*, volume 24, September.
- <sup>7</sup> Jesson, Jocelyn, 1999, Battling Against the Odds: The Changing Nature of the Teacher Unions, in Thrupp (ed.), 1999, pp 135–6.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Kasper, Wolfgang, 1996, *Free to Work: The Liberalisation of New Zealand's Labour Markets*, Sydney, The Centre for Independent Studies; and, more recently, New Zealand Business Roundtable, May 2000, Submission on Employment Relations Bill.
- <sup>9</sup> NZEI national president Darrell Ward, quoted in Bullen, Esther, 24 September 1999, Teachers Urged to Vote for Improvement, *New Zealand Education Review*.
- <sup>10</sup> Gaffney, M. and Smith, A., July 1999, *Evaluation of the TIE Scheme*, Report to the Ministry of Education, Children's Issues Centre of the University of Otago.
- <sup>11</sup> Education Review Office, October 1999, *Good Practice in Managing the Fully Funded Option*.
- <sup>12</sup> Wilson, A. and McAlevey, L., January 1999, *Do Directly Resourced Schools Differ?: A Comparison of Resource Allocation Patterns and Strategies in Directly Resourced and Centrally Resourced Schools*, report prepared for the Ministry of Education, University of Otago Consulting Group.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Hoxby, Caroline, August 1996, How Teachers' Unions Affect Education Production, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol 111, no. 3.

- <sup>14</sup> Chubb, J. and Moe, T., 1990, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, The Brookings Institution.
- <sup>15</sup> August 2000b, *Policy Directions for the Establishment of an Education Council*, Submission on the Government's Consultation Document, Proposals for Establishing an Education Council: A New Professional Forum for Teaching, p iv.
- <sup>16</sup> Macdonald, Finlay, August 1996, Class Politics, *Metro Magazine*, p 80.

## Chapter 11: The Logic of Choice – A Dialogue

- <sup>1</sup> Friedman, M., 1962, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>2</sup> The proposition was: 'It has been suggested that parents should be able to send their children to either state or private schools, with the government paying fees to private schools up to the equivalent cost of sending a child to a state school'. Forty-eight per cent were in favour, 30 per cent opposed, 20 per cent neither for nor against, and 3 per cent did not know. One thousand adult New Zealanders were surveyed, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 per cent. Heylen Research Centre, September 1991, 'A Survey of Public Opinion on Aspects of the Current Education System', volume I, main findings. Prepared for the Education Forum.
- <sup>3</sup> Hoxby, Caroline, 2000, Does Competition Among Public Schools Benefit Students and Taxpayers?, *American Economic Review*, December.
- <sup>4</sup> Taylor, Lori L., 2000, The Evidence on Government Competition, *Economic and Financial Review*, Second Quarter, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, p 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Harker, R. and Nash, R., 1996, Academic Outcomes and School Effectiveness: Type 'A' and Type 'B' Effects, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 32, no 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Chubb and Moe, 1990.
- <sup>7</sup> Coleman, James, 1982, *Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared*, Basic Books.
- <sup>8</sup> Neal, D., 1997, The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement, *Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 15, no 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Toma, E., 1996, Public Funding and Private Schooling Across Countries, *Journal of Law and Economics*, vol. XXXIX, April. Because Catholic schools in New Zealand had only recently undergone 'integration' at the time the study was conducted, they were treated as private schools for the purposes of the study.
- <sup>10</sup> Moore, Mike, 19 November 1995, Lessons in School Policy, *Sunday News*.
- <sup>11</sup> Sowell, 1993, p 257.
- <sup>12</sup> Edison Schools is one such company.
- <sup>13</sup> Eiken, Odd, 4 November 1993, 'Reinventing Civic Virtues – the Swedish Experience', address at 'Scoula: una Questione di Scelta', Bari, Italy. Eiken

had been involved in the introduction of school choice in Sweden.

<sup>14</sup> Lauder, H., Hughes, D., Waslander, S., Thrupp, M., McGlinn, J., Newton, S. and Dupuis, A., March 1994, *The Creation of Market Competition for Education in New Zealand*, The Smithfield Project Phase One, First Report to the Ministry of Education, p 33.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p 27.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p 32.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp 25–26.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Watson, S., Hughes, D., Lauder, H., Strathdee, R. and Simiyu, I., 1997, Ethnicity and School Choice, *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, volume 7, pp 105–6.

<sup>19</sup> Lauder *et al.*, 1994, pp 33–34.

<sup>20</sup> Gorard, S. and Fitz, J., 1998, Under Starters Orders: The Established Market, the Cardiff Study and the Smithfield Project, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, volume 8, number 3, p 312.

<sup>21</sup> Harrison, M., December 1999, ‘Review of the Policy Recommendations from the Smithfield Project Reports’, report for the Ministry of Education. Paper released under the Official Information Act.

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with the author.

<sup>23</sup> For a hilarious and instructive thought experiment, Mark Harrison’s ‘What If We Ran Our Supermarkets the Way We Run Our Schools?’ is highly recommended. See *A Private Education For All*, 1996, Sydney, The Centre for Independent Studies, pp 22–25. Though the context is Australia, the trans-Tasman parallels are numerous.

<sup>24</sup> The *Otago Daily Times* of 10 November 1995 included this objection.

<sup>25</sup> Upton, Simon, 30 July 1991, *Your Health and the Public Health, Summary, A Statement of Government Health Policy*, document released with the 1991 Budget.

## PART 6

### Chapter 12: Memorandum to the Minister of Education

<sup>1</sup> The Education Review Office has been an exception.

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> To some degree, this was a repudiation of his earlier 1966 study in which he had found no relationship between school outcomes and various inputs such as per-pupil expenditure, teacher salaries, the age of school buildings, and so on. This time Coleman did find certain ‘school level’ characteristics important.

<sup>4</sup> Mortimore, P., Sammons, P., Stoll, L., Lewis, D. and Ecob, R., 1988, *School Matters – the Junior Years*, Open Books, London.

<sup>5</sup> Scheerens, J., 1992, *Effective Schooling: Research, Theory and Practice*, London, Cassell.

- <sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Coleman *et al.*, 1966 and Hanushek, 1986.
- <sup>7</sup> Scheerens, 1992, p 45.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Sowell, 1995, documents this trend for the US in *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy*, New York, Basic Books.
- <sup>9</sup> Education Forum, August 2000b, p 49.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Education Forum, October 1998, *Policy Directions for Assessment at the Primary School Level*, A Submission on the Government Green Paper, Assessment for Success in Primary Schools (prepared with the assistance of Alan Smithers).

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