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**COURSE ON CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION POLICY  
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**THE CURRICULAR REFORMS  
– ARE THEY TAKING US FORWARDS OR  
BACKWARDS?**

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**THE CURRICULAR REFORMS  
– ARE THEY TAKING US FORWARDS OR BACKWARDS?<sup>1</sup>**

My task today is to discuss the policy process used in the development of the new school curricula and to tease out some of the results of what I see as the serious deficiencies in that process. I will touch on some of the structural and philosophical assumptions underlying the new curricular documents and the purposes of schooling that seem to be driving them.

**Consultation on the curricular documents**

I need to spend some time on various aspects of the consultation process used in the development of curricula because I think it has led to some of the problems in the curricular documents to which I will refer later. I should emphasise that I am talking about documents that are, or have become, public. Parts of the process, for example

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<sup>1</sup> This speech is based on an address given to a conference organised by the School of Education, The University of Waikato, and held in Hamilton on 10 and 11 June 1999. It was reported in the *New Zealand Education Review* of 18 June 1999. An article on the same subject under the heading of "A Decade of Curricular Reform" is to appear in a forthcoming special edition of the *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* to be entitled "A Decade of Reform in New Zealand Education: Where to Now?"

discussions between the writers and their reference groups and between the ministry and the writers, are not accessible to outsiders.

*the submission process*

My basic problem with the current submission process is that the ministry asks for submissions on the first draft of the final document and doesn't tell us of the various ways in which a curriculum might be constructed, the alternative assumptions on which it might be based, and the reasons for choosing certain options and not others. Contentious statements are made or implied, but it is far from clear that the nature and implications of what is said have been understood and alternatives explored.

As regards the curriculum framework, there were many fundamental decisions to be made. In a speech<sup>2</sup> to an Auckland University audience I listed several major ones such as:

- How many years of schooling should the framework cover?
- Should there be one or more curricular pathways?
- Should the framework be structured in terms of ages, stages or levels, and how many should there be?

All we were given in the draft and final framework documents were the proposed and final answers to such fundamental questions, but we don't know how the ministry came to the answers they did. Indeed it often seems that there are lots of answers floating around unattached to specific questions.

I have urged the ministry to issue discussion papers with the draft curriculum statements. At the end of an exchange of letters, I wrote<sup>3</sup> to the senior manager in the ministry concerned with curricular policy summarising what I saw as unsatisfactory in the process:

Surely it is simply not satisfactory from the perspective of usual professional standards to assert that work has been undertaken with reference to research without being able to document the research and its relevance to the issue under investigation. Or to refer to a literature search without being able to indicate what literature was in fact consulted and what conclusions were drawn from it. Or to state that all submissions on the ... draft curriculum were carefully considered and key points taken into account when there was no written identification of what the key points actually were. Or to advise that there was lots of thoughtful analysis [of certain curriculum developments] by highly competent people over a long time when there appears to be no significant written evidence of this whatsoever. And so on.

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<sup>2</sup> Irwin, M D R (1996), "Curricular Confusion. The Case for Revisiting the New Zealand Curriculum Framework". Paper presented to the seminar on implementing the curriculum, Principals' Centre, University of Auckland, 18 October.

<sup>3</sup> Irwin's letter to Ministry of Education of 24 September 1994.

Well, that was over four years, and several curricula, ago, and little has changed. Certainly increasing amounts of material are becoming available about individual curricula including literature reviews and other background papers prepared for the ministry. But we still don't know how and why the ministry came to the decisions embodied in the drafts. Moreover, the drafts are presented as if they represent the only proper way to consider the curriculum in question and only marginal issues are open for consideration.

And as with other processes, the value of what you get out depends very much on the quality of what you put into it. Of course there should be wide consultation, but it should be based on well-prepared discussion documents. A national curriculum should be developed in an open, transparent and contestable way, and I don't think this is happening.

*the analysis of submissions*

There are also problems with the way in which the submissions are treated.

I recently pointed out to the ministry that the analysis of submissions on the draft Health and Physical Education curriculum was entirely quantitative, that is it counted the numbers of submissions for and against various aspects of the draft. I asked for any ministry papers discussing the quality of the submissions and the reply<sup>4</sup> was that there was none but that "each of the major submissions was fully discussed during the rewrite process." Again, we only have the ministry's assurance that somehow, somewhere, some people fully discussed the submissions, assessed their quality and decided what, if any, changes should be made as a consequence.

What happens to submissions is that they are put into the educational equivalent of the shredding machine that operates at the landfill I go to sometimes just north of Wellington. There householders and the parks and reserves people bring their waste vegetation - everything from hedge clippings to whole trees - roots, trunks, branches, twigs and all. Everything is fed into this enormous shredder which chops it all up and out of which everything emerges at the other end as fine composting material of roughly equal size and form - whether it started as a leaf, a twig, a branch or a whole tree.

So it is with submissions on draft curricula<sup>5</sup>. Submissions of all shapes and sizes, from a one-sentence comment on one aspect to a comprehensive 100-page report are all fed into the ministry shredder which reduces all of them into ticks and crosses, that is into decisions for or against a particular proposal within, or aspect of, the draft

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education's letter to Irwin of 24 February 1999.

<sup>5</sup> This quantitative approach to submission analysis isn't confined to submissions on draft curricula - see, for example, the analysis of submissions on the assessment Green Paper [Gilmore, A M (1998), *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools - Report on the Submissions to the Green Paper*, University of Canterbury, November] which weighted submissions from groups of individuals to reflect the number contributing to them. However, organisational submissions were weighted one, since "it was impossible to determine the number of individuals represented in the submission". The quantitative approach to setting policy targets can be seen in Smith, L (1994), *Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Learning Media, Wellington.

document in question. The resulting analyses are entirely quantitative. Qualitative aspects of submissions are lost in the process.

To revert to my composting illustration, whole trees are treated as if they are no more than a mass of chips and everything that held them together – roots, trunk, and branches – are dismembered, and in the process they lose whatever integrity they have as parts of a whole. The rigour of analysis, the command of the relevant literature, the clarity with which problems are identified, distinctions made between symptoms and causes, the linkages made between the analysis, conclusions and recommendations are not reported on as if of no consequence to ministry officials. Lest I be misunderstood, I am *not* saying that all lengthy submissions are well constructed and rigorous or that all short ones are devoid of pertinent and useful comment – that would, of course, be nonsense.

The analyses of submissions usually allocate comments according to the structure of the draft document on which the submissions are made. This immediately puts at a disadvantage any submission which urges an entirely different approach. Such alternative approaches tend to be dismissed. For example, the report<sup>6</sup> on the written responses to the draft Health and Physical Education statement notes that :

Disapproval of the [draft curriculum's] overall content and direction came from a small group of organisations and from one school.

There is no examination of the quality of these submissions – no suggestion that the objections raised should be examined carefully and might have some validity, and that changes in the overall direction were up for reconsideration. Indeed the clear implication is that because such strong objections are confined to a very few organisations they can be dismissed. Consider, for example, the following statement in the executive summary:

Given the large measure of clearly expressed support, the Ministry would be well advised to retain the main thrust and direction of the draft [curriculum]. Any major shift in overall philosophy and content would be difficult to justify.

It could hardly be clearer that the quantum of support is the only thing that counts in submissions – not the quality of their arguments.

*reporting to ministers on the submissions*

It would at least be a relief to find out that the ministry in its reporting to its ministers filled the qualitative gap left by the analyses of submissions. I haven't seen all the relevant ministry reports, but certainly the ministry's two reports on the Health and Physical Education didn't make up for the inadequacies of the analysis of the submissions. Neither report has any conceptual analysis of the issues and they concentrate on reassuring statements about the extent of support for ministry proposals and that, for example, rewriting was informed by the results of various processes and that many suggestions had been taken up. Both note that a tiny

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<sup>6</sup> Duthie, B and van Aalst, I (1998), *Written Responses – Draft National Health and Physical Education Curriculum Statement*, Report prepared for the Ministry of Education, September.

minority of submitters were strongly opposed but no reasons were given for dismissing their arguments. Here again the implication is that such a small minority can be discounted – that it is the quantity of support that matters, not the quality of the argument.

The only reference to philosophical underpinnings is in the first of the two ministry reports<sup>7</sup> which says that the issues raised by the Education Forum, with which I am closely associated, had been considered by the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) which reaffirmed the policy specifications which had informed the development of the curriculum statement. It doesn't say what these issues are. The four-page PAG report<sup>8</sup> contains several reassuring statements to the effect that all issues had been "debated", "considered" and such like. The few substantive statements that are made (for example that "knowledge is a social construction") jump out at you without warning or explanation, and I am left wondering whether the authors had fully considered the implications of what they were saying.

The second ministerial report on the HPE curriculum<sup>9</sup> makes the following reassuring statement:

In Health we have moved from a hygiene or sanitation model at the turn of the century, to a lifestyle, behavioural or medical model in the 1970s and to a holistic, social-ecological model of health in the 1990s. The new curriculum is based on a holistic view of health which encompasses physical, mental and emotional, social and spiritual well-being and acknowledges the impact of social and environmental factors on health and well-being.

Fine sounding stuff with lots of 'feel-good' words – but also very question-begging! Again there is no discussion whatsoever – just assertion – as if the issues were entirely non-problematic.

Well, so much for the public consultation processes except to say that it is not surprising that a whole lot of assumptions get buried and are not identified and debated – at least not in the public arena. It is not just a terrible way to conduct a public debate about a national curriculum. It also means that an enormous burden of change has been imposed on all teachers, trustees, parents and children on the basis of a very poor quality policy development process.

I now want to turn to the actual assumptions that were largely buried in the curriculum development process.

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education (1998), Report to Minister of Education entitled "Publication of the National Curriculum Statement Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum and revoking the Health, Physical Education and Home Economics Syllabuses", 26 November.

<sup>8</sup> Twigden, D (1998), Report to the Secretary of Education by the Policy Advisory Group on Health and Physical Education, 24 November.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Education (1999), Report to Minister of Education entitled "Publication of the National Curriculum Statement Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum", 2 February.

## Structural assumptions

There are all sorts of assumptions in the curricular documents about the way in which curricular material should be structured. Some of the main ones include:

- that the national curriculum should cover all ages and stages of school education;
- that the curriculum should make explicit the expected effects of education on the inner life of children under concepts such as "well-being", "personal identity" and "self-worth", and seek to inculcate specific attitudes about the way society should be ordered, for example on the Treaty, partnership and biculturalism;
- that essential learning areas are a better way of assembling curricular material than the traditional subject or disciplinary approach;
- that some subjects can be integrated without distortion, for example history, geography and economics within social studies;
- that all material can be ordered within the same structure of strands, levels and outcomes and that the structure can be determined independently of curricular content;
- that differences between kinds of skills, between subjects, and between subjects and other kinds of learning<sup>10</sup> are irrelevant to the way in which a curriculum framework can be constructed; and
- curricular material should be specified in terms of outcomes and not content.

All these assumptions are, at the very least, questionable and will in time be increasingly questioned.

I have little doubt that eventually our extraordinary wholesale leap into an outcomes-based method of curriculum specification will be seen as most unfortunate. The idea is superficially attractive: in the interests of accountability we should surely concern ourselves with children's actual achievements. How children should attain the desired outcomes can safely be left to the professionalism of teachers. On the face of it, this sounds very sensible. But what we find, as we browse through most of these new curricula, is extraordinary vacuity. There is very little recognisable content. For example, here are some objectives from the new English curriculum in the strand for "expressive writing":

Level 1: write spontaneously to record personal experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Subjects can be understood as ways of establishing different kinds of truth about the world; applied education consists of practical applications of knowledge (eg engineering and medicine); and occupational training is defined by specific tasks. In its concern to deny the so-called 'academic/vocational divide', the NZQA has tended to play down these differences. See Smithers, A (1997), *The New Zealand Qualifications Framework*, Auckland: Education Forum, pp 40-41.

Level 3: write regularly and with ease to express personal responses to different experiences and to record observations and ideas

Level 5: write regularly and confidently to respond to a range of experiences, ideas, observations, and texts, developing a personal voice

Level 8: use expressive writing regularly, fluently, and by choice, to reflect on, interpret, and explore a wide range of experiences, ideas, feelings, and texts, expressing complex thoughts in a personal voice.

In addition to their lack of content, what is striking about these objectives is the number of adverbs like "regularly", "confidently", "fluently" and so on which are capable of a wide range of interpretation. For example, how often does a child have to write in order to reach the "write regularly" requirement? How fluent is "fluent"? Yet we are also told that learning outcomes are to be so "clear" that students' achievement can be assessed against them. And are we not in danger of dividing up material into such small bits that we lose the sense of the whole and the relationships of the various parts? Cardinal Newman stressed the importance of intellectual coherence:

How many writers are there ... who, breaking up their subjects into details, destroy its life, and defraud us of the whole in their anxiety about the parts."<sup>11</sup>

We have very much the same problems with unit standards, but we don't seem to have learnt much from our experience with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)<sup>12</sup>.

With the outcome-based curricula we have yet again the problem of a superficially attractive notion being pushed far beyond its proper limits. A structure for curricular material has been determined without regard to differences in the material to be placed within it - everything has to be forced into the same procrustean bed and it's too bad if some things have to be distorted in the process. Outcome specification may be useful where outcomes can be readily defined, but in other cases, for example higher order critical skills, this is not so.

### **The philosophical assumptions**

The more obviously 'philosophical' assumptions include postmodernism, constructivism, the needs-based and student-centred approach to education, and relativism. It is difficult to discuss these with assurance because of the lack of explicit ministry discussion on them. Another difficulty is the complexity of the issues including the fact that one is talking about locations on a range of possible

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<sup>11</sup> Newman, J H (1891), *The Idea of a University - Defined and Illustrated*, London: Longman, Green, and Co.

<sup>12</sup> A very early critique is "Designing the Framework - A Position Paper on Problems and Issues in the Restructuring of National Qualifications" by Codd, J McAlpine, D and Poskitt, J, Education Department, Massey University, 1991. This identified many of the problems which arose later as the NQF was developed and implemented. There are numerous subsequent critiques.

positions, and often one has to consider several dimensions not simply one linear range.

But the lack of any acknowledgement of these influences has led to some obvious tensions and contradictions. For example:

- How is the confident rationalism of modernity, evident in the conviction that all education can be reduced to clear outcomes against which pupils can be assessed, to be equated with the doubts of postmodernism and constructivism, evident elsewhere, about the possibility of objective knowledge?
- How can the "socio-ecological perspective" and the concept of "well-being" be advanced in the face of postmodernism's rejection of such meta-narratives?
- How can child-centredness be combined with an undifferentiated curriculum?
- How is the promotion of critical skills to be equated with the promotion of particular views about society which are to be accepted without question?
- How is the scepticism about objective moral judgment to be combined with the promotion of particular value judgments?
- If there is no moral reality beyond individual values how can any objective value be attached to the individual child?
- Should spirituality be promoted in the absence of the theological understandings important to many parents and children, and in what does it consist?
- How can the problem of self-harm among young people be addressed in the context of values relativism, which undermines standards of right and wrong, and in the absence of theological awareness which for many provides a basis for meaning in life?

*rigorous eclecticism*<sup>13</sup>

I should note a very recent contribution by the ministry on the question of its philosophical assumptions. This is a 4-page memorandum<sup>14</sup> distributed with background material on the draft Arts curriculum statement.

The basic position advanced in the memorandum is that "New Zealand seeks to adopt an approach of *rigorous eclecticism* with respect to the underpinning philosophies of its curriculum documents" (emphasis added). No single philosophy is to be adopted or dismissed without serious consideration. The key criterion for adoption is the potential for contribution to the overall quality of the work being undertaken. The memorandum analyses the principles of the framework and

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Glennys Allen for comments on an earlier draft of this section.

<sup>14</sup> Memo dated 12 May 1999 entitled "Policy Framework for *Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum: Draft Statement*" from the Learning and Evaluation Policy unit to the Secretary for Education.

demonstrates the influence of varying philosophies on them and this is seen as evidence of rigorous eclecticism. The draft Arts curriculum is viewed as displaying the same eclecticism.

But it seems to me that there are still questions to be answered. Again we are left with assertion and not analysis – descriptions of choices but not reasons for them. In the first place it is not clear what "rigorous eclecticism" actually means. Does the qualifier, "rigorous", refer to the deliberate avoidance of reliance on any one philosophy or does it mean that the criteria for selection from various philosophies are rigorous? If the former it is still unclear why reliance on one philosophy should be dismissed out of hand as a matter of principle. If the latter, then one would want much more specific criteria than simply the unelaborated reference to quality including criteria for resolving conflicts between philosophical positions and between philosophical preferences and socio-political objectives such as those mentioned in the memo including perceived Treaty and equity objectives. In short, do we find in the curricula documents a careful *selection* or an untidy, haphazard *accumulation* of ideas. The memo uses the word "amalgam" which would seem to suggest the former, but the basis on which the ministry's philosophies are thought to combine is not provided.

Even if there has been deliberate, careful selection, why should we accept the ministry's particular selection? Is its brand of eclecticism any better than yours or mine? If the ministry's philosophical choice is optimal then we need to know why it is considered to be so and to what other alternative selections it was preferred. In the absence of such information, there are no grounds for believing that its eclecticism is any better than anybody else's.

The cynic in me suggests that "rigorous eclecticism" is a convenient *ex post* rationalisation for the "amalgam" of the sometimes conflicting influences that are to be found in the curricular documents and is advanced as a defence against the charge of inconsistency. You will have noted that it is *New Zealand* that seeks to adopt "rigorous eclecticism", not just the ministry. I never knew this until two months ago, and I wonder how widely and for how long this was known even within the ministry.

Moreover, the basic argument has a circular flavour: the framework principles reflect various philosophies and hence demonstrate eclecticism; our philosophic approach is eclectic therefore you must expect to find various influences and, perhaps, some inconsistency in the curricular statements. Superficially this is all very convenient, but where does it take us? Not very far I suggest. There is still a lot of work to be done.

### **The purpose of schooling**

At the heart of much of the debate about the curriculum is the clash of views about the purpose of education. Three emphases struck me as I went through the documents: the economic emphasis with a focus on turning out young people with particular vocational skills and aptitudes; the emphasis on schooling to turn out critical theorists who can reconstruct society; and the emphasis on the inner life of children through concern for their well-being, personal identity, self-worth and such like.

I have reservations about all these emphases. I am concerned that matters which were previously contingent on education – vocational preparation and the development of skills and character – have now become of its essence. The deliberate attempt to inculcate certain views about the way society should be ordered – as opposed to inculcating personal values such as honesty and self-discipline essential to educational endeavour and much else in life – can be dangerous.

What is lost in the current reforms is the sense that education has intrinsic value – that it has something to do with living a worthwhile life and becoming human through engagement with a moral and intellectual inheritance of great worth. The point about education is that it is, or should be, open-ended<sup>15</sup>. How children will respond cannot be predicted. We would like to think it will make them cultivated, but that can take many forms. As soon as we try to predetermine the results, which the outcomes approach seems to encourage, we have abandoned education for indoctrination.

It is worth reflecting how utilitarian the official view of the purpose of education has become by rereading some of the works of those who thought deeply about education only a generation ago. Oakeshott, writing in 1972, said that his greatest fear was the socialisation of education by which he meant the systematic apprenticeship to domestic, industrial and commercial life. For him education has no such extrinsic purposes; it is the disinterested study of the best that has been thought and said – not the pursuit of goals external to itself such as we find in many of New Zealand's new curricular documents. Indeed, he saw socialisation (as he defined it) as "the most momentous occurrence of this century, the greatest of the adversities to have overtaken our culture, the beginning of the dark age devoted to barbaric affluence."<sup>16</sup>

R S Peters, writing at the same time<sup>17</sup> as Oakeshott, said that education involved getting children, who start off as "barbarians outside the gates", inside the "citadel of civilisation so that they will love and understand what they see when they get there." He emphasised that the "activities and modes of thought and conduct which define a civilised form of life are difficult to master" and involve not happiness but "an uphill task in which there are no short cuts." The contrast between these views of just a generation ago and that which comes through in the curricular documents is stark indeed. From the older perspective, the citadel of education as now defined by officialdom has already been invaded and the barbarians are in charge.

I do not, however, want it thought that I think that schooling has no vocational purpose. I have argued elsewhere that more account should be taken of children's varying abilities, interests and aspirations, particularly in the middle and senior

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<sup>15</sup> Minogue, K (1996), "European Identity", paper given to the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority conference on Curriculum, Culture and Society, London, February.

<sup>16</sup> Oakeshott, M (1972), "Education: The Engagement and its Frustration" in R F Dearden, P H Hirst and R S Peters, *Education and the Development of Reason*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>17</sup> Peters, R S (1972), "Education as Initiation", in R D Archambault (ed), *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

secondary curricula. But the curriculum must also provide training in morality, and provide opportunity to engage with the riches of our cultural inheritance.

One of the underlying problems is, I think, the confusion, to which I have already referred, between what I see as the essence of education and its contingent benefits. Undoubtedly education has benefits for the vocational sphere as for many other areas of life. But education becomes corrupted when those contingent benefits become of the essence and drive our school curricula. I see the same tendency at the university level. The territorial ambitions of some of our universities into vocational areas will, I suggest, have at least two unfortunate consequences. First, it will make it increasingly difficult for them to reject applications from those who are unsuited to traditional university level work – to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Secondly, universities will become increasingly beholden to employers. Of course, universities have always had a vocational side – initially the training for the church and government administration and then for the so-called learned professions. But this vocational side was seen as contingent on, and subordinate to, the essence of their existence. Now, I fear, what was contingent is increasingly seen as the essence.

### **Some conclusions**

Current reforms have been presented as inevitable progress, for example as part of a necessary substantial overhaul of the Thomas reforms of the 1940s. I noted earlier how the Health and Physical Education changes were presented to the minister. The structure of outcomes is seen as indubitably superior to that of content.

The extraordinary ambition of the reforms – the extent of their coverage, the explicit concern for the inner life of the child, and the massive structural changes – has brought, I suggest, its own problems. The more the curricula attempt the more they are likely to become bogged down in the sorts of contradictions to which I referred earlier and which will confuse teachers and ultimately bring the curricula into disrepute. I do not think, by the way, that consistency is everything – there are too many tensions and trade-offs in real life. But it *is* very important to be clear about, and to be able to defend, our choices.

An appeal to rigorous eclecticism doesn't help very much. If a national curriculum is to command widespread and enduring respect, it cannot ignore such questions. So the first conclusion I draw is that the more you attempt the more important it is to be rigorous in identifying problems and evaluating possible solutions. Unfortunately uncritical adoption of internationally modish ideas has often substituted for serious analysis.<sup>18</sup> The quantity of inadequately informed support rather than quality of analysis has driven the curriculum development process.

My second conclusion is that the more you try to include in a national curriculum the more you are going to get off-side with people. So rigorous consistency is not the complete answer. There is no way that everybody in a pluralist society is going to agree on the purposes of education and the means to achieve them. We all come

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<sup>18</sup> Irwin, M D R (1997), "Follies and Fashions in New Zealand Education", paper presented at the Waikato Forum on Education, University of Waikato, 7 August; and (1998) "The Education Debate in the 1990s: An Intellectual Adventure or Unexamined Orthodoxies", paper presented to the course on 'Learners Learning and Teaching in Context', Wellington College of Education, 8 April.

with our own baggage and, in an open society, that is how it should be and always will be. I am conscious that my own views may well be wrong – at the very least in some circumstances and for some children. But so may yours and, more particularly, so may the ministry's.

One of the obvious features of schooling is the high level of individuation. Every child, parent and teacher is different. Yet we have a highly centralised government education system which, in spite of much talk about the importance of the individual child and multiculturalism, seeks to treat them all in much the same way within a largely undifferentiated curriculum. We don't expect central direction for mass-produced consumer goods like motor cars because we know it doesn't work, yet we think it will somehow work in schooling. So the answer in my view is to greatly reduce the educational portfolio of the government, including its curricular functions<sup>19</sup>.

In a report<sup>20</sup> I wrote five years ago on the qualifications, curriculum and assessment reforms, I came to the conclusion that the national curriculum should be restricted to the essential content of core subjects which would reduce from, say, two-thirds of each subject in the primary years to, say, half in the junior secondary years with the remainder to be decided by each school. Statements would describe in simple clear language the essential knowledge, understandings and skills that should be acquired at each form level by all students up to and including Form 4. But after five years of curricular confusion I am inclined to think that even that modest portfolio might be too much.

To answer the question in the title of this address, I would have to say that my overall judgment is that the curricular reforms of the last ten years have imposed enormous costs with very few discernible benefits – that they have taken us backwards and not forwards. Given the apparent lack of thought that has gone into them, this is not surprising. I have little doubt that we will spend much further time and effort over the next decade in unraveling them. How should we go about this?

As I have already indicated, substantially reducing the government's involvement in the curriculum and leaving much more to schools and the professionalism of teachers is part of the answer. But it is certainly not the whole answer if the standard of school teaching and student learning is to increase. We need at least two other policy changes – both highly contentious in today's climate. First, we need independent assessment of the performance of all children at the primary level with publication of school results<sup>21</sup> and, of course, quality examinations at the school leaving levels. Unfortunately, the government appears to have set its face against the

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<sup>19</sup> According to a recent media report the British government has done just that – abandoned much of the extensive school curriculum introduced some 11 years ago for England and Wales to "enable teachers to use their professional judgment" (*The Weekly Telegraph*, Issue No. 408, May 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Irwin, M D R (1994), *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications – An evaluation of current reforms*, Auckland: Education Forum.

<sup>21</sup> The case for national assessment in literacy and numeracy for all children at age 10 and the publication of school results has been well made in Education Forum (1998), *Policy Directions for Assessment at the Primary School Level – A Submission on the Government Green Paper 'Assessment for Success in Primary Schools'*, Auckland: Education Forum, October.

former and, in terms of the latter, appears – sufficient details are still lacking – to be about to introduce unsatisfactory compromises between unit standards and traditional examinations.

The second requirement is that parents must be given the ability to choose the curriculum and pedagogies they consider most suitable for their children and the school they think most likely to provide them. In recent years we have seen some increase in the funding of private schools, but it has not been sufficient to halt integration into the government system which has left only a very small percentage of the school population being educated outside that system. These are issues well beyond my present brief, but I wished to make it clear that, as in most policy areas, a single policy instrument will not achieve what is wanted and may even have perverse results.

What is usually wanted for successful reform is a suite of mutually reinforcing policy changes. This is certainly what is required in the school area, and the suite should include reducing government control of the curriculum with a corresponding increase in school and teacher control, providing more reliable information about the relative performance of schools and students, and giving parents the ability to respond to the increase in information and to greater curricular and school diversity. At present we appear to be going backwards on some – possibly on all – of these fronts.