

THE EDUCATION DEBATE IN THE 1990S: AN INTELLECTUAL ADVENTURE OR UNEXAMINED ORTHODOXIES?

MICHAEL IRWIN POLICY ANALYST NEW ZEALAND BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE	WELLINGTON 8 APRIL 1998
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I understand from Dugald Scott that your course is designed to encourage critical thinking about teaching and administrative practices. In the time available to me I want to make some general observations about the education policy debate in New Zealand. Then I will narrow my focus on to some issues which I recommend as matters for your critical attention.

I am going to talk mostly about curricular and pedagogic issues. But I want to start with some comments on ownership, funding and regulation because in other sectors of the New Zealand economy considerable improvements have been made precisely in these areas.

In education, the classical liberal argument was made by John Stuart Mill a century and a half ago that government financing need not, and probably should not, imply government provision of the services thus paid for:

The objections which are urged with reason against State education do not apply to the enforcement of education by the State, but to the State's taking upon itself to direct that education; which is a totally different thing.¹

Karl Marx, who in education as in other matters was anti-statist, put it even more strongly not many years later in 1875:

¹ Mill, J.S. (1956), *On Liberty*, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, Indianapolis, p. 129. It was originally published in 1859.

'Elementary education by the state' is altogether objectionable.²

For both writers state regulation is one thing, but state provision is very different and to be deplored.

From a liberal viewpoint, there is good reason to believe, in schooling as elsewhere in society, that people should be free to choose between alternatives, that individuals and businesses should be free to enter the industry, to advertise and supply services, and that competition would not only widen the range of choice but also make for greater efficiency of operation, better regard for parents and children as clients, and more readiness to innovate. However, in New Zealand as elsewhere, the provision of free schooling remains substantially a public monopoly, though local experiments with greater freedom are to be found, and are perhaps increasing.

Much academic debate in New Zealand appears to be of a defensive nature against what are seen as actual or potential liberal infiltrations of education policy. What education academics make of Marx's anti-statist views about state provision of schooling is not clear – perhaps it is an embarrassment and best forgotten³. In any case such topics rarely lead to dispassionate debate.

Many specifically educational issues, those to do with the curriculum and pedagogy for example, tend to be ignored while much emotional energy – though not much intellectual horsepower – is spent on banal issues as the bulk-funding of teacher salaries. In fact my first observation about the education debate in New Zealand is that it is largely centred on what I would call second-order issues – which doesn't mean that they are unimportant.

My second observation would be that the nature of the debate in New Zealand is highly defensive of the status quo. This is not to say that the proponents of the status quo want exactly the same as exists now. Usually more is demanded – especially more public money.

² Marx, K. (1947), *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, p. 42.

³ I am indebted to Roy Nash of Massey University for noting Marx's "provocative comment" on public education by the state in his article entitled "The Treasury on Education ... taking a long spoon" (*The New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 23 No. 1, 1988). Far from wanting it to be forgotten, Nash urged that "those of us with socialist sympathies involved in education should never allow [this comment of Marx] to slip far from our consciousness." I doubt if many have followed his advice.

A third observation, and this puts an important gloss on the second one, is that New Zealand educators are extraordinarily trusting and uncritical of new developments in some specifically educational areas. The two new frameworks in New Zealand education – the curriculum and qualifications frameworks – have very major implications for teaching practice and depend on some major, mostly unidentified, assumptions about epistemology and pedagogy. Yet it was some years before the qualifications framework began to receive widespread critical attention – and there has still been very little criticism of the curriculum framework and not much in depth engagement with the curriculum statements that derive from it⁴. We strain at gnats such as salary bulk funding but swallow large-scale frameworks and other camels!

The second and third observations would appear to be contradictory – that defensiveness of the status quo somehow co-exists with uncritical acceptance of major change. The only way I can put these two facts together – and I think they are facts – is to note that changes made by and within the education establishment⁵ tend to be uncritically accepted whereas changes advocated by those outside the establishment arouse deep suspicion and worse. One factor is that many education academics, college tutors and school principals and teachers have been involved in the

⁴ The Education Forum is clearly an exception. In its submissions and reviews it has addressed most of the new school curricula.

⁵ By 'establishment' in this context I refer to the broad alliance of largely like-minded educationalists and educators in the bureaucracy, university education departments, teacher unions, colleges of education and schools. Ministry officials used to talk (and perhaps still talk) of the 'education family' which means much the same. As within other 'families' there is broad agreement on some key points, internal disagreement on other matters, and vigorous opposition to outsiders who challenge it. The formation of the Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC) might be seen as seeking to counter threats to the cohesion of the 'family' by reasserting the boundary markers of its credo such as the importance of an adequately funded public school system, cooperation (not competition), education as a "partnership between parents and teachers" (not a client/provider relationship), "authentic community involvement in schools" (not market-based parental choice), and "education as a basic human right available to everyone ...". The formation of groups to preserve features deemed important to their members is, of course, perfectly proper, and QPEC's advocacy of accurate information, research-based debate, and the "highest academic and ethical standards" is highly commendable and to be welcomed. However, it is questionable whether the defensive, restrictive and political nature of permitted debate within the establishment fits with the more open, objective approach to the promotion of best possible practice from the perspective of the child as client which is implicit in the professionalisation of the teacher workforce – a process which is also advocated within the establishment but the implications of which may not be fully appreciated. (See the Education Forum's submission on the teacher education Green Paper for a discussion of professionalisation.) (Quotes are from QPEC's current membership application form.)

development of these major reforms, and it is understandable that once involved in something it is less easy to stand back and apply objective criticism.

This brings me to my fourth point which is that we do not enjoy an open, free debate about education in New Zealand. On the contrary it tends to be closed and severely circumscribed by taboos or, in current jargon, 'political correctness'. You will not find the vigorous – but usually courteous – debate between academics that takes place in other domains. The authors of views that don't fit within the narrow, homogeneous range of discussion are often treated with *ad hominem* attacks, including conspiracy theories and sometimes downright rudeness.

Another feature of the education debate is that views about the alleged deficiencies of the 'New Right' tend to be instantly accorded the dignity and rigidity of fact and are then cited by other educationalists without further investigation. I trust that in this college at least you will always be required to go back to primary sources and not to rely on secondary literature,

There are courageous educationalists who challenge the myths of New Zealand education, but they are few. Several education academics have told me that they do not say and write what they really think because of fear of the likely personal and professional repercussions. I sympathise; but it is, I suggest, a very sad reflection on education academia in New Zealand and on the threats to academic freedom not from without but from within the academy.

Of course this suffocating atmosphere affects students as well. Several have told me that if they are to get good marks, or even to meet their course requirements, they have to express the views that lecturers want them to express and to quote only from the literature lecturers want them to read. It does, at the best of times, take more than usual confidence for a student to challenge established views. But such an approach to critical questions is precisely what should be encouraged by setting open-ended questions which invite analysis (not closed ones which demand a particular conclusion), by prescribing readings from a range of viewpoints, and by assessment criteria which reward intellectual effort (including command of the relevant literature and range of viewpoints) not faithfulness to an established credo.

One of the guidelines used by the NZQA in determining which institutions should be allowed to use the description 'university' is that:

the university normally has a stated and actual commitment to the concept of free enquiry by its staff, which it also encourages in its students.⁶

By this measure, and if education departments and faculties are indicative of the general ethos of the universities, then the status of some of our universities should perhaps be reconsidered.⁷

Christopher Woodhead, the head of the UK's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), has called for a "debate in education [which is] characterised by a sense of intellectual adventure: by an enthusiasm for a critical reflection on ideas, values, assumptions, current practices, by a refusal ever to allow a working hypothesis to harden into unexamined orthodoxy".⁸

And Woodhead's call for open debate is my cue to raise some working hypotheses that, because of the restricted nature of the education policy debate in New Zealand, have hardened into unexamined orthodoxies or are in danger of becoming such.

I do need to make one very important caveat. I am only drawing on official documents and the writings of education academics and leading educators. What goes on in schools is, I trust, very different. In fact, we lack good information about the attitudes and practices of actual teachers and actual school communities - as opposed to the attitudes and practices expected of them 'from above'.

- **The purpose of schooling** This is becoming increasingly utilitarian:
 - either to serve the interests of the economy; or
 - to achieve radical change in the structures of society.

The idea that education might have its own intrinsic merit is alien to current official documents and few education academics seem to give this view much

⁶ NZQA (1998), *Guidelines for the Interpretation of Section 162(4) of the Education Act 1989*, NZQA, Wellington, February.

⁷ Of course no such reconsideration will take place. This particular guideline refers to the statutory role of universities as "critic and conscience of society". This role is a conceit which has no place in legislation. The notion that any group of institutions should be given such a role by statute must surely be anathema to all who consider that we live in a democracy in which every person, individually and as a member of various community and other organisations, is morally accountable to society for his or her actions - an accountability which cannot in any sense be delegated to others. It is a concept which should not be confused with the quite separate issue of academic freedom.

⁸ Woodhead, C. (1995), *Education: The Elusive Engagement and the Continuing Frustration*, Ofsted Annual Lecture, London.

support, perhaps because it is contrary to the child-centred approach of New Zealand education⁹. New Zealand educationalists tend to see business interests lurking everywhere in the educational undergrowth ready to pounce upon and privatise any unwary educational institution while at the same time wanting to use schooling to achieve their own political ends.

- **Child-centred pedagogy** This seems to be so ingrained in New Zealand education that to raise it as in possible need of review is, for many, unthinkable. But I urge you to think about it. You will find many references to this approach and its outworking in the new official curriculum documents and in much academic discussion of pedagogy and epistemology.

As an alternative approach consider this view:

... to develop effective pedagogic means involves starting from the standpoint of what children have in common as members of the human species; to establish the general principles of teaching and, in the light of them, to determine what modifications of practice are necessary to meet specific individual needs. If all children are to be assisted to learn, to master increasingly complex cognitive tasks, to develop increasingly complex skills and abilities or mental operations, then this is an objective that schools have in common; their task becomes the deliberate development of such skills and abilities in all their children. And this involves imparting a definite structure into the teaching, and so into the learning experiences provided for the pupils This approach, I am arguing, is the opposite of basing the educational process on the child, on his immediate interests and spontaneous activity, and providing, in theory, for a total differentiation of the learning process in the case of each individual child. This latter approach is not only undesirable in principle, it is impossible of achievement in practice.¹⁰

In case you think this is a member of some ultra 'new right' business organisation speaking I would point out that it is a quotation from Brian Simon, the prominent British Marxist education academic.

⁹ At a recent meeting with education officials I expressed the view that education could be seen as the process by which one generation passed on to the next generation useful information and the national culture – to introduce children to the world about them so that they could find their way through it safely and with some confidence. One official's response was that education might be better seen as introducing the world to the child – a comment which, I suggest, reflects the child-centred orientation of the education establishment (see footnote 5 above).

¹⁰ Simon, B (1981) "Why no Pedagogy in England?", in Simon, B. and Taylor, W. (eds) *Education in the Eighties: The Central Issues*, Batsford Academic and Educational, London, pp. 124-145.

Consider also the following passage about schools in England by Christopher Woodhead in his recent, 1996/97, Ofsted annual report:

Teachers are ... teaching better. In primary schools, we are seeing more challenging direct teaching, often to the whole class, thus engaging the attention of all pupils. More primary schools are moving away from the reliance on the single class teacher in order to utilise the particular subject knowledge and enthusiasms of individual teachers. Setting pupils according to ability is also becoming more common. More systematic attention is being given to the teaching of literacy and numeracy. ... [Teachers] are gaining more confidence in teaching crucial knowledge and skills such as phonics and mental arithmetic.¹¹

Could our primary schools in New Zealand learn something from this?

- **Curricular differentiation** This is another no-go area for New Zealand educators. But why not address the issue? Why should we have only one curriculum for all children? Should all children be expected to progress along the same curriculum, simply stopping off at different points according to ability and interest? Professor Geoffrey Howson has a very good discussion of this in his critique, published by the Education Forum, of the new maths curriculum¹².
- **Institutional differentiation.** This is more a matter for secondary schooling than for primary schooling. But note that it is the norm in much of continental Europe and presents an alternative approach that we should at least consider – if only, perhaps, for senior secondary students. Again, why should we expect the same type of institution to meet the needs of all students equally well? Is there a conflict here between the real educational needs of our children and our egalitarian outlook, which argues that any curricular differentiation should take place within the same institution?
- **Skills** The curriculum framework identifies eight essential skills – one more than the number of essential learning areas. The curriculum documents consequently contain many assertions that their prescriptions will lead to the attainment of these essential skills. But what we are not told is how precisely engagement with particular content areas will develop particular skills. Skills

¹¹ Ofsted (1998), *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 1996/97*, Ofsted, London, February.

¹² Howson, G. (1994), *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Education Forum, August.

tend to be portrayed as 'free-floating' - unattached to knowledge and transferable between cognitive domains - a view which is not, I understand, supported by the relevant literature.

- **Integrated learning** Of course, it is important for children to appreciate the connections between learning areas, and as primary school teachers you will be well used to weaving in and out of the subject divides. But New Zealand education takes integration to the point of absurdity, especially in the social studies and health and physical education curricula, both of which lack defining characteristics of what should be included within their respective remits. The problem is that academic study, applied education and vocational education have different purposes¹³. Further, academic subjects have different organising principles, as between, for example, history with its concern to understand particulars (ideographic) and the natural sciences with their search for general laws (nomothetic)¹⁴. The incautious combining of subjects with different purposes and/or principles of organisation will lead to insuperable difficulties and has been an underlying problem with the National Qualifications Framework and the push for 'seamless' education.
- **Biculturalism** Many state educational institutions uphold 'biculturalism', the Treaty of Waitangi and Treaty principles in statements of intent, mission statements and such like. So do curricular documents. I recently challenged academics at one of our universities with the following:

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

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

¹³ Smithers, A. (1997), *The New Zealand Qualifications Framework*, Education Forum, Auckland, November, pp. 40 and 74.

¹⁴ Crittenden, B. (1998) "Social Studies: The Plan for New Zealand Schools", *Agenda*, forthcoming.

criticism of privilege and resulting potential for disharmony be answered, bearing in mind that low educational achievement is not restricted to Maori and that many Maori succeed.

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

I have had no response to these questions - and I didn't expect any. Several academics have subsequently told me privately that they appreciated me raising the issues. Between the lines they were also, I think, saying that I was raising questions which I could not expect them to raise.

- **Values** Values education is of much current concern. But what happened to virtues and vices¹⁶? Values are a relativist concept which raises questions such as how, in this post-modern age, do we match concern to inculcate particular values with cultural pluralism? Or, for that matter, with a child-centred curriculum! Why not consider instead, and with more chance of agreement because firmly grounded, the values intrinsic to the noble internationalising enterprise of education with which you are all engaged. The British philosopher Oakeshott asked questions such as these:

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

¹⁵ Irwin, M.D.R. (1997), *Follies and Fashions in New Zealand Education*, Waikato Forum on Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, 7 August.

¹⁶ For an extended discussion of this question see Gertrude Himmelfarb (1995), *The Demoralization of Society - From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, The Institute of Economic Affairs, London.

But you won't find much, if anything, about patience, industry, concentration, openness to refutation, doubt, and the love of truth in recent curricular documents.

As for going any further, James Q Wilson points out:

... children do not learn morality by learning maxims or clarifying values. They enhance their natural sentiments by being regularly induced by families, friends and institutions to behave in accord with the most obvious standards of right conduct – fair dealing, reasonable self-control, and personal honesty. A moral life is perfected by practice more than precept; children are not taught so much as habituated.¹⁷

- **Spirituality** This used to be deep in 'no-go' land but has recently made a, possibly brief, re-emergence into the public arena. As a Christian and therefore a theist, I believe in the spiritual dimension of human existence, but I do not share the current enthusiasm in some quarters for introducing spirituality into the school curriculum. I am doubtful whether spirituality has aspects which can be divorced from a religious tradition, and, even if there are such aspects, whether they can and should be taught in schools¹⁸. And how could they possibly be assessed? Are teachers to become spiritual directors? Of course older children should be introduced to the main beliefs of the Christian religion – how else can they understand much of Western, including New Zealand's, history, literature, institutions and thought? And perhaps they should be introduced to other ways in which humans seek to explain the cosmos and the place of humans within it. But I am very doubtful if schools should go further. Spirituality is essentially a personal issue, and a personal, as opposed to an academic, engagement with religious issues is a matter, in my view, for churches, families and local organisations.
- Finally, a few reflections on the latest curriculum offering – the draft Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum statement. It represents a new approach, so is certainly not an 'unexamined orthodoxy'. But certain features of the draft need careful examination if they are not to suffer that fate. The draft has the best of intentions, but after a preliminary read I suggest four areas of difficulty which some of you may wish to consider, possibly in the context of a submission to the Ministry of Education:

¹⁷ Wilson, J. Q. (1993), *The Moral Sense*, The Free Press, New York, p. 249.

¹⁸ For an elaboration of this view, see my *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications – An evaluation of current reforms*, Education Forum, Auckland, May 1994, pp. 26 and 27.

- even more than social studies, HPE is an astonishing example of curricular imperialism. Much of the school curriculum could fit within its ample embrace. It could equally be argued from the perspective of the draft that there is not much in HPE that couldn't be accommodated within other of the school curricula;
- it intrudes, in my view, into the responsibilities of other organisations including families, whanau, churches, marae and health professionals;
- some of the central concepts such as 'personal identity', 'total well-being' and 'self-worth' are confused and beg more questions than they answer; and
- it promotes spirituality without theology which I find curious, to put it mildly. And for reasons raised above, I do not, in any case, think it is a suitable matter for a state school curriculum.

I hope the kind of issues I have raised come to be more widely debated within an education sector characterised by intellectual freedom, where all views can be pursued without restriction, where the courtesies of civilised discourse are respected, and which is not so inundated and saturated with the backflow of society's problems that it becomes indistinguishable from the rest of New Zealand society. There are some courageous, sceptical, probing voices within education. They need to be encouraged. Perhaps you can add your own voices to them.