



## Curriculum: Sitting on the Fault Line

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 1, Issue 2, 74-79, 2004*

---

DAVID CHAPMAN  
*Massey University*

It is not often enough that we stand back a little from what we do every day and examine the things we take for granted. Within education we have taken a lot of matters for granted for a little too long. As a teaching profession we espouse a cooperative philosophy and spend a lot of time in classes with students developing cooperative skills and as teachers planning collectively. Some schools still attempt to work together in the clusters set up some years ago during the advent of *Tomorrow's Schools*. Within the educational literature there has long been an advocacy for flat management systems, collective ownership of decisions and the like. A recent example of this philosophy is the goal stated in the first issue of *Curriculum/Marautanga Project*, published in April, 2004 by the Ministry of Education. The Project hopes to 'strengthen school ownership of curriculum' (p. 1). In this short commentary I wish to briefly explore the implications of this statement but I wish to contextualise it first with some introductory points about education in general.

While we always talk about cooperation, we seldom acknowledge that schools are embedded in a competitive educational climate. There are the obvious examples. Many schools have rigid line management systems that are the exact opposite of the approaches advocated in the literature. In education and most other areas of society 'contrived consultation' is the order of the day - processes occur which seeks justification for a decision that has already been made and as a result, many people no longer bother to waste their energy in the pretence. Some schools, even within their traditional clusters, provide free buses to poach students from the surrounding district. Many secondary schools have responded to the chronic under-funding of education by developing the overseas student industry that is now a hugely competitive business with some very worrying aspects that are hardly educational. Although we teach children about cooperation it is hard to find in the world they will enter post-school. These kinds of *contradictions* are now deeply structured into our education system.

It is fascinating how we have managed to develop a system that appears to provide choice and room for innovation but is actually very tightly controlled. Thus, the flair is not focused on developing learning, but on 'educational' frills and fads that might attract extra students in the 'marketplace'. This kind of thinking is the antithesis of the educational platitudes that most schools have enshrined in their Charters. In reality we live in an educational climate that Professor John Codd describes as a 'culture of distrust'. Within this culture it is very difficult to address these contradictions because they arise inevitably from the market philosophy upon which our society now rests. Clearly, I do not

subscribe to the generalization of this ideology across society, but I wish to look at how these approaches have contorted, and will continue to contort schooling through the construction of the curriculum.

Some history. Many will remember the widespread curriculum consultation process undertaken by Russell Marshall in the mid 1980s just before *Tomorrow's Schools* arrived. The Committee to Review the Curriculum for Schools collated 33,000 public submissions and produced a draft curriculum statement with these headings:

- Culture and Heritage
- Language
- Creative and Aesthetic Development
- Mathematics
- Practical Abilities
- Living in Society
- Science, Technology and Environment
- Health and Well-being

These curriculum aspects exhibited a 'broad fields' approach to curriculum design, seeking to overcome, but not reject, strong subject demarcation and to enhance the links between different areas of the curriculum (Echoes of this can be seen in the 1993 *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* at the top of page 9 where a call for subject linking is made). My point here is that this statement arose from a broad reaching and democratic process but was quickly discarded by the neo-liberal, new-right, Ministries of David Lange and Lockwood Smith. It was a curriculum statement that was owned by the community because it was developed in response to their contributions to the process. However, Lange subsequently ignored curriculum and focused on administrative change whilst Smith was the one who oversaw the reconstruction of the national curriculum in the early 1990s.

In 1993 Lockwood Smith also released a discussion document called *Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In it he said:

If we seek to improve our economic standing relative to that of our competitors, our commitment to education and training must be greater than that of other countries. We must adapt more quickly to change than our competitors, and the skills of our workforce must improve faster than the skills of other workforces.

Of course this competitive approach is built into the curriculum framework too as some attention to its Foreword will show. When we look at the Essential Learning Areas in Lockwood Smith's curriculum though, they can be seen to have reverted back to 19<sup>th</sup> century subject headings and to be constructed on a framework of behavioural (achievement) objectives. I have not the space to examine these in detail and they are in fact usually rather broadly stated. I would say, however, that I have yet to meet an educator who claims to be able to write an 'outcome statement' for a regular class of 30 that is worth writing. Who knows what learners actually take away from the learning experience.

Such objectives are a tool for control of education, not for the improvement of learning.

The competitive ethos that Lockwood Smith referred to doesn't even work in the wider economy, let alone in education. Remember the \$600 million bail-out of the Bank of New Zealand after the 1987 sharemarket crash. More recently, Air New Zealand needed a substantial rescue from government. Likewise, the rail infrastructure has had to be rescued, and we have had ongoing power supply crises which private industry has proved unable to manage. One of the points is that you simply cannot run an operation on a profit-making footing and expect it to also operate in the public good. The two agendas are in opposition. In the document quoted above, Smith did say he was making no promises. I don't know any educators that celebrate the greater commitment we have made to education than other countries in the years since. I do know many who consider that they do not have the resources to do their work properly however.

Indeed, if one reads the Curriculum Stocktake Report released by the Ministry of Education in September 2002, it concedes that the educational disparities between rich and poor are widening since the implementation of the new-right, neo-liberal social and economic reforms. Further, in the data quoted, there is no evidence that any of the changes over the last twenty years have improved the quality of learning in schools. That is, administrative change, improved reporting, and a focus on outcomes and assessment have not improved educational quality. That might be unfair though, since teachers have been running so hard keeping up with the ongoing regime of change that they have had very little time or energy left to think about teaching. The main point though is that inequities are widening. It is often said that the best statistical predictor of educational success is parental income, so this widening disparity may simply show that in New Zealand the poor are getting poorer (Jane Kelsey's book, *Reclaiming the Future* provides ample evidence of this). This growing inequity is something that is global as well as local. It is occurring within countries and between countries and is argued by many to be the result of the globalised economy. It is simple to understand though, in a competition the strong win and the weak get left behind. I make this point because more recent educational statements continue to put complete faith in a globalised future to solve all our economic problems, and 'education' continues to be seen as the vehicle for catching 'the knowledge wave'. I would like to suggest that this is a complete fantasy.

In relation to the Curriculum Stocktake Report, it is built on all these assumptions of neo-liberalism mentioned above including competition and self-interest. Over the top of these, the new notions of 'inclusion' and 'social cohesion' have been added. It does not seem to have struck home to the writers of the document that the social dislocation and alienation that are clearly seen as a problem are caused by subscription to the same neo-liberal assumptions, that is, competition and self-interest. The report is also strongly built on the assumption that a globalised 'knowledge future' will be good for everyone. I am not aware of any evidence to support this claim, but as indicated above, know there is a substantive body of evidence that suggests it

is rubbish. I note the Stocktake Report does not once mention that learners are 'stakeholders' in their own education.

Moreover, the Minister's own statement of educational priorities *Education Priorities for New Zealand* released in May 2003 goes further. Trevor Mallard calls for the development of 'future proof' schools and '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' but provides little substance about what these might be. I suggest that this is because you cannot predict the future as many of our political leaders claim to be able to do. The Minister's goals make particularly sobering reading.

*Goal One: Build an education system that equips New Zealanders with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.*

We need our education system to be relevant and compare well with the best in the world. In many ways it does. But the challenge is for us to continually maintain and enhance our position relative to other countries. Our education institutions need to adapt quickly to the changes occurring in our society and economy, embrace new ways of doing things, be technologically capable, and focus on continual improvement in learning and teaching. Over the next three years we will accelerate this transformation process particularly in the school and tertiary sectors.

It is worth pointing out the similarity between this and Lockwood Smith's statement of a decade earlier and I would suggest that the lack of development in the statement is simply because it lacks any substance to develop. It is really a hope that somehow we will be good at whatever it is you need to be good at to succeed in the global rat race. Although, rather than being a 'rat race' this is perhaps a lemming race. The goal could have been written by a lemming in that there seems to be little care for where we might be going as long as we get there first. The Minister's second goal is equally problematic.

*Goal Two: Reduce systematic underachievement in education.*

While our education system produces good results on average, there are too many New Zealanders who underachieve. Being Māori or Pasifika, coming from a poor home, having special needs or a disability are no reason why someone should fail in education or have fewer learning opportunities. The system does not yet work well enough for many of these learners, but we know that these learners are capable of achieving similar outcomes as others. Over the next three years we will focus on reducing the level of underachievement experienced by some groups in our education system – both for children and adults whose learning needs were not met in the past. We will focus on ensuring that all children get the strongest possible learning foundations in the early years, reducing dropout and failure rates in schooling, and raising the skills of adults with limited prior educational success.

What is of concern here is that poverty is one of the main causes of underachievement and that poverty is increasing, thus we have the responsibility for a complex and structural social problem placed on teachers. This is a problem that has its causes in the assumptions that underpin society and the economy. To suggest it can be solved by education is either naivety or malice.

Thus I return to the metaphor I have used in my title, the curriculum, and indeed schooling, has been, and is being constructed on a faulty set of premises. These are the competitive and self-interested assumptions of neo-liberalism. To talk about cooperation when we are in direct and deliberate competition with our neighbours is to be on that fault line. When the Ministry talks of 'strengthening school ownership of Curriculum' as it does in the first issue of the *Curriculum/Marautanga Project* newsletter, but fails to acknowledge that the curriculum is a political document constructed on an ideology that does not serve the interests of most learners, it too is right on that fault. Such an approach to education, I would argue cannot be durable.

Reference to the Curriculum Project raises another deeply worrying and related issue. In an apparent response to the ongoing assertions that the curriculum is crowded (there is no doubt teachers' lives are crowded), the National Curriculum Statements are to be 'degazetted' so that they are no longer compulsory. What this means in detail is unclear, but there seems a danger that what is to occur in schools may be removed from the public domain by this decision. Instead we may have a situation where the shape of school activity is shaped by Ministerial edict, or by the nature of the educational review process. Such moves have the potential to allow for even more direct political involvement in schooling.

The points have been made that the current political assumptions about education and the curriculum do not serve the interests of the majority of citizens and that financial and educational disparities continue to rise. In this light, increasing the ability of politicians to manipulate the education system and especially the curriculum seems extremely risky. I would argue that if we really do want a just and equitable society it should be built on principles of justice and equity and not on competition and the market. Further, curriculum should be a matter of public democratic discussion in the interests of all citizens, especially learners themselves. Educators cannot afford to ignore the dangers here.

At present, teachers attempt to maintain a culture of cooperation and inclusion that is actually essential to the functioning of schools. These are not the principles that inform social relations outside the school, however, and many students are conscious of this. To pretend to learners that inclusion and social cohesion are compatible with neo-liberalism through the rhetoric of curriculum and schooling is, I suggest, to increasingly perpetrate a deceit. Many school leavers face a simple choice, unemployment or student loan debt. Some get both.

There is a point in a society where the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' continues to grow, and where the messages we try to

develop about the world in schools are at such odds with post-school reality that they are untenable. My reading of the Stocktake Report, the Curriculum Project and the Minister's priorities suggests that learners in schools are seen merely as economic units in service of the economy. I think that as educators we need to attend very closely to these messages. This is partly because this view represents an extremely narrow educational vision but also because as teachers we are in a difficult position - trapped between the hopes and expectations of parents and students, and the realities of society on the other. These are two good reasons to be active rather than passive. If we are not, we may find the fault line snaking its way right into the classroom.



## About the Author(s)

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2004*

---

DAVID CHAPMAN

*Massey University*

David Chapman is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Technology, Science and Mathematics Education at Massey University College of Education. He teaches Science Curriculum Studies and Environmental Education, and has research interests in teacher empowerment to change classroom practice with a focus on environmental education. This involves an increasingly wider view of the messages transmitted through education because the way we treat the environment is intimately linked with our social values and the way we treat each other.

David Chapman  
Department of Technology, Science and Mathematics Education  
Massey University College of Education  
Private Bag 11-222  
Palmerston North  
Phone: 06 356 9099 extn 8602  
[D.J.Chapman@massey.ac.nz](mailto:D.J.Chapman@massey.ac.nz)