



‘Whose Education Is It Anyway?’: Why It Is Important That Teachers Understand and Question the Broader Contexts Shaping the Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers need to understand the economic and global contexts that underpin the curriculum because they impact on the interpretation, definition and perception of their role. Grundy (1994) maintains that there is a “... taken for granted view of the curriculum as something that is given to, or provided for, students” (p.27). This view of curriculum fails to acknowledge the crucial, dynamic role that teachers and students bring to the active construction of knowledge. Teachers need to be prepared to understand the ideologies underpinning the curriculum that they interpret and deliver. They should be aware of the reconstruction of knowledge and the changing values that they impart through the delivery of the curriculum. The politicisation of education directly affects teachers. This new alternative concept of teaching is changing the role of teachers from professional contextualists to that of technocratic reductionists (Codd, 1998).

The New Right has driven the economic, social and cultural reconstruction of New Zealand since the 1990’s. The allegiance to the global market and the commercialisation of education is at its most apparent in the outcomes-driven curriculum, and is epitomised in the technology curriculum (Lee, O’Neill & McKenzie, 2004: 49). The technology curriculum is a model of a ‘how to’ curriculum rather than a content approach; this curriculum area illustrates the reconstruction of knowledge under the dominant political discourse of the New Right (pp.64-65), a discourse teachers need to be aware of. The exhortations from the government to embrace the ‘Digital Horizons’ are an explicit map for teachers to lead their students towards becoming a “... information technology-literate workforce that will help New Zealand to maintain its competitive advantage” (Ministry of Education, 1998).

IT’S NOT NEUTRAL

The discourse of the New Right is explicit in the interpretation of curriculum: “... the imperatives of the modern world require a new culture of enterprise and competition in our curriculum” (Smith, cited in Peters & Marshall, 2004: 113). Therefore, these contexts impact on the way society sees and values knowledge and those who deliver and inspire it. Teachers are the agentic force through which

the content and intent of the curriculum is devolved and as such are implicated in the consequences of its ideologies:

Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people.

(Apple, cited in Peters & Marshall, 2004:111)

The explicit intent of the curriculum is to "... set the direction for learning" (Chamberlin, 2004: 79). Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the political and social influences that set and guide that direction. Clearly, the directions of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF) are set by the hegemonic ideologies of the New Right. Firstly, we need to understand how the New Right gained control of the curriculum in order to create an enterprise culture. Our national curriculum is a "socio-cultural construction" (Peters & Marshall, 2004: 111), and as such it is not a neutral object. It is shaped by the politics and aspirations of those who manipulate it. In 1989, the brief on the state of the education system was delivered by the Treasury, who believed "... that teachers had captured the curriculum for their own ends" (O'Neill, Clark & Openshaw, 2004: 37). Thus the catalyst for the education reforms was an economic one. The control of curriculum creation and development became governmental. After abolishing the Department of Education and the Education Boards, the bureaucracy was divided into three: The Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), and the Education Review Office (ERO). Up until the 1990's the discourse was "of effectiveness, efficiency, economy and equity underpinned by accountability, but by post 1990, it shifted to achievement, choice, enterprise and competitive advantage" (Brooking, 2004: 70).

Previously, curriculum development was fostered by the Curriculum Division of the Department of Education. The curriculum was reviewed regularly with "input from subject committees, the Department of Education, teacher groups, training colleges and independent schools. Later included university teachers..." (O'Neill, Clark & Openshaw, 2004: 31). The inclusion of educators increased in the 1950's and produced an open-minded and broadly understood curriculum that was 'owned' by the educators who developed and delivered it. De Marris and Le Compte capture this paradigm of the curriculum as "the total school experience provided to students whether planned or unplanned" (cited in O'Neill, Clark & Openshaw, 2004: 25). The Curriculum Division was closed in 1989, and the politics of the New Right was the prevailing vision for the future of education reform. The aim was to bring educational institutions in line with the neo-liberalist ideology of free market economics. This competitive educational climate maximises individual choice and ensures teachers are held accountable for producing favourable economic and educational outcomes. In this way "the imposition of business/managerial values and structures" (Peters & Marshall, 2004: 115) are focussed specifically on curriculum and the scrutinizing of teacher and school performance.

The constant supervision of performance by the Education Review Office (ERO) ensures that schools are held accountable for the investment in education. This is a market model of line production and quality control which deprofessionalises the work of teachers. No longer satisfied with the ideology of the professional commitment, teachers are constantly monitored through assessments in an outcomes-driven curriculum, professional appraisal, and a competitive model of performativity. These ideological changes in education have led to a culture of distrust and a change in the way people within educational institutions relate to each other (Codd, 2003: 45). The neoliberalist view is that without external scrutiny schools would be inefficient and continue to perpetuate knowledge not deemed flexible enough to meet the real needs of business and labour markets, nationally and internationally. The aim of the New Right, then, is to create an 'Enterprise Culture', one that relies on people having the skills base needed to reach the government's economic goals (O'Neill, Clark & Openshaw, 2004: 37). The curriculum has been vocationalised to this end.

TEACHING IS PERSONAL

Teachers should be concerned that the policies of the New Right are the driving force behind the curriculum. By silently purveying this new definition of curriculum they are also redefining themselves and their profession. Peters and Marshall (2004) comment on this deskilling of teachers as "...turning teachers into technical functionaries" (p.112), and they argue that curriculum control has been removed from educators and those responsible for its implementation. The current process and content of curriculum are driven by the notion of enterprise culture, where the curriculum is viewed as an object or marketable product (Grundy, 1994). The NZCF is not constructed by teachers, it is "...developed elsewhere, to be given to those for whom it is intended" (p.29). Teachers need to clarify the nature of what is given.

The neo-liberal discourse about education makes clear that the function of the NZCF is ensure that New Zealand is able to compete in a global economy in a culture of enterprise. The politics of the New Right have become successfully embedding in the NZCF. These notions of enterprise culture have permeated the education system through the reconstruction of knowledge as skill-based and measurable, through the marketisation of schools as enterprises, and through repositioning the notion of knowledge as something that can be bought and sold (Lee, Hill & Lee, 2004).

The reconstruction of knowledge through an outcomes-based curriculum has been designed to reduce knowledge to skills; these are more easily measured and transfer readily to the job market (Elley, 2004). Rather than seeing the curriculum as an active, dynamic process in which teacher and students engage, the neo-liberal view of curriculum as an object imposes restraints on all participants (Grundy, 1994).

The intention of the NZCF is that teachers will transfer a set of skills to students who in turn will apply these skills in a predetermined continuum of learning. This predetermined continuum of skill development is seen as being a lifelong enterprise in which individuals will continually make an enterprise of themselves, repeatedly upskilling in order to compete in the labour market. This pattern of continual upskilling has become an expectation not only for children,

but also for teachers and schools – “education is thus reconstructed as an enterprise, and students (and the public more generally) are to see themselves as *enterprises* in which to invest” (Peters & Marshall, 2004: 115).

Part of this reconstruction process, driven by the culture and practise of the market, has been the inclusion of the technology curriculum. The introduction of the technology curriculum was driven by economic, vocational and business rationales. The desired outcome being “the development of enterprising people to enhance economic productivity and for firmer links between business and schools” (Ministry of Education, cited in O’Neill & Jolley, 2004). The technology curriculum is a skills-based curriculum designed to foster the skills of innovation and production. The ideology of the New Right underpins this curriculum document; the intended outcome is that New Zealand will be able to compete in the global economy. Teachers have accepted the huge financial investment in ICT and the pressure to implement ICT in the classroom, wooed in part by the increased support in professional development, being provided with laptops and release days to up-skill. There is good reason to question the inclusion of ICT in its current conception as a subject, and one that is to be seamlessly embedded into prime position in an already crowded curriculum. There is little publicly released research that validates ICT in the curriculum. The technology curriculum is another thread to the global and economic influence in the NZCF. In view of the way that the technology curriculum emphasises the core values of enterprise and commercial development, teachers need to question the origin, ownership, and direction of a curriculum that focuses on production and consumption in a world of environmental fragility.

TEACHING HAS A MORAL PURPOSE

This emphasis on enterprise is part of the neo-liberal fascination with the relationship between the individual and the market place. Underlying the ideology of education as an investment in self, and the market driven environment of schools as competitive enterprises, is the notion of the individual above all else. This view of the person entails one that is integral to the very nature of humanness to make and want to make continuous consumer choices, to be a frequent autonomous chooser (Peters & Marshall, 2004). In relation to education this means that, according to the rules of market competition, only the best survive, and only the best deserve to, therefore schools must compete to attract the consumer. The Curriculum Stocktake Report indicates a continuation of the same basic underlying notions of the New Right’s deification of the individual. John Clark’s critique of the stocktake notes this continued focus on the individual and economic good (Clark, 2004a: 73) The NZCF makes this clear with statements such as:

The New Zealand Curriculum recognises that all students should have the opportunity to undertake study in essential areas of learning and to develop essential skills. Such learning will enable them to develop their potential, to continue learning throughout life, and to participate effectively and productively in New Zealand’s democratic society and in a competitive world economy.

(Ministry of Education, 1993: 3)

This notion of the autonomous chooser is “continually being shaped by or made through the ideologies and multimedia forms of presentations that emphasise the demand for skills” (Peters & Marshall, 2004: 122), therefore, the reasoning follows that making an enterprise of one’s lifetime depends on making a series of choices. These choices include purchasing education or a set of skills. It is implicit in this reasoning that the consumer choice about quality education holds more value than decisions made by educational providers about quality education.

How does this broader context of the individual impact on the role of teachers? The dominance of choice, the prominence of the individual to constantly employ this autonomy, has no concept of others. The needs of the individual override the idea of the common or collective good. Therefore, in an educational setting this means parents constantly want what they perceive as the best, or most time and attention for their child. If they cannot get their choice of teacher or programme they will simply choose another school, or if the school is in a situation of role decrease, the teacher will be heavily pressured to give in to their demands for fear that they will take their child (business) elsewhere. The decentralised system of education in New Zealand means that schools are self-governing, and often in direct competition with each other. In order to attract pupils and Boards of Trustees with skill sets that are seen as a valuable asset to the school, these ‘enterprise’ schools compete to attract individuals with business and managerial expertise. Therefore the dominant culture of the New Right becomes central not just to the curriculum but to the actual governing of the school. The “constant auditing and evaluation create both a spectacle and a press toward fabrication” (Ball, cited in Ballard, 2002: 29); this affects the moral purpose of what teachers do. Teachers need to be aware of the effect business practices will have on their profession: “As teachers become embedded in these concepts and practices, they may become compliant and self-regulating” (p.29).

CONCLUSION

The moral purpose of teachers – serving the best interests of the child, pedagogical ethics, integrity, democracy, and respect for diversity – is being diluted by the business culture of the New Right. The consequence of the politicisation of education is the erosion of this commitment and the desire for common good. The pedagogical aim of teachers is becoming heavily influenced by efficiency, economics and the politics of the consumer. Teachers need to be more aware of the ramifications of what they are asked to do, and they may have need to exercise judgement in whether or not they are happy to continue to deliver curriculum where the end justifies the means. If the aim of education is to educate children so that they have a critical understanding of the world and are able to participate in a social democracy then teachers must be encouraged to stand up for these ideals. As it says in a quote on a school staff room wall: “No one ever got taller through being measured”.

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I am Deputy Principal of Riverview Primary School, Kerikeri in the Far North. In 2006 I was a recipient of one of the NZEI DP/AP study awards. I have a developing interest in the way teachers see themselves and I am still passionate about the need for robust debate about the nature of teaching and the reality of the work we do in the educational landscape of continual change.