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## Curriculum and Society: Functions and Influences

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Throughout history powerful forces have shaped the education that NZ children have received, and that has shaped the nation. The curriculum that is taught in a school at any particular time is not just 'good subjects to give a good education'; more the result of deliberate or subtle forces at work that reflect the power base of the country or the general world view of the ruling class at the time.

Traditionally, education was thought of as one long uphill climb to greater and greater heights of accomplishment. Every new subject introduced, every act of parliament, every change in the curriculum was thought of as an advancement in education. However, in the late 1970's and throughout the 80's, both in New Zealand and though the western world, there began a time of questioning this outlook on history. People began to ask 'why' certain subjects were taught, or certain ideas or practices introduced or deleted from the school curriculum. And the answers they came up with shed light onto the hidden agendas that are often at work influencing curriculum - agendas to do with ethnicity, gender, social class and power. "One of the principal reasons why curriculum change and therefore progress has been so slow and relatively ineffectual is that we have failed to adequately examine the assumption on which the curriculum rests" (Bassett, 1973).

The point must not be overlooked, however, that the re-writing of educational history that has and is taking place in the latter part of the twentieth century, does still not produce 'truth'. Whoever writes history - today or 100 years ago - writes it from whatever subconscious belief system they are operating under. No-one is immune to it. If, for example, we declare the curriculum of 1900 'anti-Maori', and therefore 'inferior' in our current 'enlightened' viewpoint, we must recognise that our current viewpoint is just as much influenced by the worldview of our times, as theirs was by their times. In another 100 years, the current 'radical' curriculum changes may be viewed in exactly the same way. This being said, we have no option but to examine curriculum influences from the perspective we have today.

The function that curriculum has for society is quite extensive. However, to a large extent, its influence goes unrecognised because of its very subtle nature. Curriculum is

used directly or indirectly by those in power to maintain the status quo, or by lobby groups to shape the future society. One only has to reflect, for example, on the curriculum of one hundred years ago that educated women in domestic duties to keep them in the home, or Maoris in agricultural and trade subjects to keep them on the land. The influences that shape curriculum, in turn, can range from major world wide events that are easily identifiable, to more subtle and gradual influences, like shifts in the world view or thinking of society.

This essay will look at the influences that shape curriculum and the function or flow-on effect that that curriculum then has on society.

### **Government/Business Initiatives**

The government of New Zealand has played a central role in shaping the curriculum of the nation's schools. When the Department of Education was established in 1877, it introduced primary schooling that was free, compulsory and secular. It set in place a curriculum based heavily on the British system, and aimed at maintaining the status quo. The government decided, maybe subconsciously, that the ruling middle classes should stay in power, women should stay in the home, handicapped should stay out of sight, and the Maoris should stay rural - and constructed the curriculum accordingly.

The government has continued to have a reasonably tight reign over education in this country by direct means such as laws, and by indirect means such as withholding funds. By the end of the nineteenth century when secondary schooling was on the increase, albeit for the middle and upper classes. The government used financial means to attempt to influence some denominational boarding schools that were educating Maori students - Te Aute College in Hawke's Bay and St Stephens in South Auckland for example.

Another major example of government initiative came in 1936 when the first Labour Government was elected and created the welfare state. Peter Fraser became Prime Minister and C.E. Beeby his Director of Education, and together they introduced radical reforms to the curriculum. "Labour was the party of economic and social equality, and greater educational opportunity was one of the main means of achieving it" (Renwick, 1992). Fraser announced Beeby's plan for an egalitarian educational in 1940 with his now famous quote "the government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever the level of his academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen to a free education of

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a kind for which he is best fitted and to the fullest extent of his powers” (AJHR, 1939, 2-3 as cited in Jones et al, 1990, p57).

Beeby’s Thomas Committee Report became the cornerstone of a reformed secondary curriculum. Its recommended core subjects were introduced in 1945 and comprised English, Social Studies, General Science, Elementary Mathematics, Music, Physical Education, and a craft or art. “Formal education beyond the primary level was no longer to be a special privilege of the well-to-do or the academically able, but a right to be claimed by all who want” (Renwick, 1992). Beeby, through four Labour governments, is remembered for initiating ‘equality of education’, but was it equitable?

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century draws to a close, the current government set up a think-tank of New Zealand’s business leaders to canvass input for the current curriculum changes. The Business Roundtable is made up of powerful, wealthy, (white) men who are at the cutting edge of industry. Will the changes they want favour a vocationally orientated curriculum in which students are educated specifically to meet highly specialised fields? Or will a skills based curriculum better equip students for the next century? These issues are open to hot debate.

### **Rise of Feminism**

Throughout this century, the role of women in society has slowly but dramatically changed, and this has influenced the curriculum taught in schools, which in turn influenced society. When ‘free, compulsory and secular’ primary school education was introduced in 1877, it did not formally include a gender differentiated curriculum. “Yet the experiences of girls, when they did attend school, were very different from those of their brothers” (O’Neill, 1992).

Because of their value as free labour in the home, and the expected domestic role of young women, fewer girls attended school, and those who did, did so for shorter periods. Girls were educated with the sole purpose of preparing them for domestic duties and the subjects taken reflected that - callisthenics, cooking and sewing. Many people agreed with Frederick Truby King (Founder of the Plunket Society) who said: “advanced education was detrimental to the role of women as mothers, stating that the stress of education interfered with girl’s physical development, their ability (or willingness) to breast-feed, and they would be unable to cope as well as their mothers with the more physical demands of labour and childbirth”(Tennant, 1977 as cited in

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Pihama & Mara, (1994) p.222).

During the war years when women were required to fill the shoes of men serving overseas, they soon realised they were capable of far more than tradition dictated. Consequently, in the years that followed, women exerted more influence within society, and girls were not frowned on for taking subjects that would lead to academic endeavours. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Playcentre movement in 1941 provided a vehicle to free women trapped in the home with young children, and allowed them opportunities for education, paid employment and recreation. Despite the advances however, those in power discouraged them from staying in the workplace by various means that amounted to emotional blackmail - a woman's real place was in the home!

As attitudes to women have slowly changed, so too the educational opportunities for women. As the twentieth century draws to a close women can move into any job they choose from doctor to scientist to fireman. Gone are the days when the curriculum limited the career choices of females.... However, it must be asked, is it really that clear cut?

Research data and recent statistics indicate some improvements for girls and women in countering the sexist ideologies which continue to pervade educational institutions. However, the effects of most of these changes still remain tenuous and vulnerable. Clearly, critical thinking educators must be aware of the ways in which dominant discourses produce and maintain existing gender relations which serve to perpetuate gender inequalities. (Pihama & Mara, (1994) p.246)

In reality, it may take the passing of yet another generation before women really do obtain equity of education in New Zealand.

### **Age of Technology**

As the world entered the 'space age', and with it massive technological advances in almost every area of human endeavour, the curriculum taught in New Zealand schools has had to respond. Changes in the curriculum through the 80's and into the 90's included new subjects centred around computers - information technology; word processing; programming - as well as changes in other subjects such as science, maths, and social studies. However, the rapid changes in technology are also

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responsible for other more subtle changes in the curriculum. Instead of teaching students actual facts and specific information, schools are leaning towards teaching them more generic skills, such as problem solving, investigative skills and so on, in an effort to equip them for the rapidly changing world. Teachers need to be aware that these 'new' subjects are in traditional male domains, and if real equity is to be obtained, girls will need encouragement to study and up-skill themselves in these areas.

As educationalists try to second guess the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century society, major curriculum changes such as those introduced in Today's Schools have been developed. In comparison to a century before, these changes are more a case of schools catching up with society, rather than influencing it. To what extent the new curriculum will be successful of course remains to be seen, but one thing is certain, the education system of New Zealand will never be the same.

### **Recognition of Indigenous People - The Maori Issue**

Revisionist historians in New Zealand discovered that George Hogden, the Inspector General of Education at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, firmly believed that the Maori race was dying out, and it was only a matter of time before they became fully integrated with the whites. To this end, he ensured that English was the only medium of instruction in schools, and Maori children could be strapped for speaking their native tongue. The Maoris were kept in manual and rural activities well into the next century.

During two world wars and the ensuing years, Maori were seen to be making their contribution to society and becoming more and more visible. A general awareness began to rise of Maori as a people with a culture. As we moved into the 70's and 80's, educated Maori began to lead a world wide movement for the recognition of indigenous people.

Today we see Maoris fighting on every front of society for retribution of 'past wrongs', and for recognition as a separate culture and race. Part of that recognition involved setting up Te Kohanga Reo (language nest) schools which are based upon the total immersion of children in Maori language and culture from birth. Currently there are 767 Te Kohanga Reo pre-schools in New Zealand, and Maori people are endeavouring to carry the education of their own people through primary, secondary and eventually tertiary levels. In state schools, this rise of Maori has influenced the curriculum with the introduction of various types of compulsory Maori Studies as well

as Maori as a language option in public exams. The question some ask, however, is should it be bi-culturalism in New Zealand...or multiculturalism? The response that some make is that we cannot be a multicultural society until we have first become a successful bi-cultural society. Whatever the view - time is not on our side.

### **Multiculturalism**

New Zealand has seen an influx of people from a vast array of nationalities, especially over the past 25 years. This has been combined with the 'shrinking world' - a world connected by computers and jet planes. With the media to make us instantly aware of events around the world, cheaper travel opportunities, international trade, and a rise in immigration, it is commonplace to find schools offering courses such as Japanese language and culture, Mandarin or Korean.

One hundred years ago Latin was taught as an academic subject to illustrate intelligence - today languages have a much more practical use for day-to-day communication in our multicultural society, and to prepare students to do business in the international marketplace. Multicultural New Zealand can be vividly illustrated at Mt Roskill Grammar School, which caters for students from 52 different nations, and offers a variety of language/culture studies.

### **Teachers**

Teachers have a tremendous influence on curriculum, as they are in a grass-roots position to assess and modify any changes being introduced to curriculum. The way the curriculum is actually delivered to the students, and which parts are emphasised, all reflect teacher bias. In addition, teachers are often responsible for implementing a 'hidden curriculum'. For example, in the early part of this century, marching drill was never part of the formal curriculum, but was generally accepted in schools due to people's recent exposure to war.

## **Integration of Students with Disabilities**

As society began to recognise those who didn't 'fit the mould' may still have a contribution to make, the idea of isolating people with disabilities into separate institutions started to change. This was greatly influenced in recent history by the government's need for financial cutbacks in areas such as health. So instead of funding separate institutions, they proposed funding individuals through the Special Education 2000 Grant. Regardless of the equity issues which are being widely disputed, this integration process will continue to influence curriculum. The students educated in an integrated school will in turn influence society, hopefully by being more tolerant of those with disabilities.

## **Social Attitudes**

After the experience of two world wars and a depression, the period of 1960's and 70's was a time of social upheaval and full employment. Flower power; free love; anti-Vietnam and similar sentiments were hallmarks of the 'me generation'. This in turn flowed on to society - education leant more towards a holistic approach. There was no need to train for a specific job, so let's just get a good broad-based education. The curriculum reflected society's changing attitudes.

Beeby had been the reformer who introduced 'equality' - for all in education. "In 1974 the Educational Development Conference Report declared...(this)...to be outmoded and in need of replacement. The new word...was 'equity' " (Jones et al, 1992. P59). Successive reports have re-enforced this idea, and education is now leaning towards giving all students the same opportunities - which means spending a lot more on some with higher needs, and less on others.

## **Conclusion**

The curriculum of this country is in the middle of radical reform. Educationalists, at least, recognise that the final result will not be about what is 'a good education', but more about power and lobby groups, morals and belief systems. Whether the curriculum New Zealand takes into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is effective or not, will be judged by future generations. What is certain however, is that powerful influences will continue to shape curriculum and this will influence tomorrow's society.

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**(Bassett, 1973; Cumming & Cumming, 1978; Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994;  
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Mara, 1994; Renwick, 1992)**