

EDUCATION REFORM

Who Should Control the Curriculum?

BY **KEVIN DONNELLY**

Over the last 10 to 15 years, education systems across the English-speaking Western world have sought to reduce the power of centralized bureaucracies and to give schools greater autonomy. The focus of the devolution movement has been on matters of school management and organization to the detriment of the broader, and arguably more important, question of curriculum. The result is that while schools have been freed in areas such as budgets, staffing and planning, they continue to be forced to adopt a state-mandated curriculum. The result is that the right of parents and students to choose from a range of schools is seriously compromised as schools are made to follow the same centrally determined curriculum. The situation is made worse when examining the recent history of curriculum fads and ideologically-driven changes that have been forced on schools. Since the early sixties, schools have been forced to adopt a curriculum driven by:

- the ideology of the Left;
- the progressive education movement;
- the work-based competency movement;
- the attack of the postmodern; and
- the 'standards movement'.

As so graphically highlighted during Victoria's gas crisis, when an industrial accident led to the principal supplier closing down, monopoly control means that all are made to suffer when something goes wrong. The solution is to free schools from provider capture and state control.

INTRODUCTION

When talking about schools and education, books such as Chubb and Moe (1990), Gerstner (1995), Gannicott (1997) and Caldwell and Hayward (1998) focus primarily on the value of freeing up schools from provider capture and ensuring a more effective and efficient use of resources. Reforms such as the charter school movement in the US and Canada; the *Schools of the Future* initiative in Victoria; the New Zealand reforms associated with *Tomorrow's Schools* and the move to grant-maintained schools in the UK, on the whole, reflect this preoccupation. While the reforms listed

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are different in detail and the extent to which they go in implementing change, all give priority to structural matters such as: reducing the influence of centralized bureaucracies and increasing the power of school-based deci-

sion making; making education more accountable by shifting the focus from inputs to measuring outcomes; and giving parents greater flexibility and choice in deciding which schools their children will attend.

The question of the broader purpose of school education, especially as it relates to the curriculum, is rarely mentioned and any discussion that does occur is generally restricted to the question of standards, especially as they relate to the so-called basics of literacy and numeracy. Thus, instead of addressing such matters as the purpose of education, defining what constitutes a balanced and worthwhile curriculum and deciding whether the state should have control over the curriculum, the school reform movement restricts itself to discussing education in terms of measuring school effectiveness and defining minimally acceptable benchmarks or levels of performance. That such a situation is unsatisfactory is not, as Crittenden (1998) argues, simply because curriculum goes to the very heart of why we have schools and why we value education. Equally as important is the fact that freeing up the school system will have little value if all schools are made to follow the same curricu-

lum. To put it another way, what is the point of parents and students being able to choose which school they want if all schools are made to follow the same centrally determined curriculum?

The above situation is made worse by the fact that if the curriculum is centrally mandated, especially by the state, then it is very easy for it to be co-opted by whoever is in control at the time to further their own ends. As so ably stated by John Stuart Mill:

A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government ... in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind...

(Mill, 1859, page 175)

Worse still, as so graphically demonstrated by the gas crisis in Victoria, if there is monopoly control over a particular service or product and something goes wrong, then all are made to suffer. A perfect illustration of this can be found with the new approaches to literacy that became the official orthodoxy during the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of this 'whole language' approach being universally promoted, generations of students have been condemned to illiteracy and educational failure (Turner, 1990).

The following paper presents a historical overview of the various movements and trends that have sought to control education over the last 20 to 30 years; while the focus will be on Australia, events in the US, New Zealand and England will also be referred to. Notwithstanding that the movements under discussion have different aims and objectives, all are similar in that those who advocate them believe they have the 'one true answer' to solve the problems of education. A second similarity is that all have gained influence and power by exerting control over a centralized, bureaucratic system of school education controlled by the state.

CO-OPTING THE CURRICULUM: THE IDEOLOGY OF THE LEFT

One very obvious way in which the school curriculum has been co-opted since the late 1960s relates to the way in which the Left has used the

state-controlled education system to further its political agenda. As outlined by Barcan (1993), the cultural revolution of the 1960s was not only about moratoriums, Woodstock and flower power; equally as important was the decision by many on the Left to change society by radically redefining the education system. Joan Kirner (1984), one-time Minister for Education in Victoria's Cain Labor Government, made this perfectly clear in a paper delivered at a Fabian Society conference, when she said:

If we are egalitarian in our intention we have to reshape education so that it is part of the socialist struggle for equality, participation and social change, rather than an instrument of the capitalist system ...

(Kirner, 1984, page 11)

The critique developed by the Left drew on authors such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), Friere (1972), M.F.D. Young (1971) and Althusser (1971) and argued that the education system is a critical part of the 'ideological state apparatus' used to marginalize and disempower the poor and dispossessed.

The so-called traditional academic curriculum was labelled as bourgeois, elitist and socially unjust, and many teachers, with the aid of Left-leaning governments, teacher unions and academics,

argued for innovations such as community schools, non-competitive assessment and a curriculum based on what was immediately accessible and relevant. While some States and Territories, such as New South Wales, remained committed to selective high schools and a competitive, academic senior school certificate, others, such as Victoria, Queensland and the ACT, experimented with more radical alternatives. In Victoria, the Labor Government established a new senior school certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which was supposedly designed to advantage working-class and non-English-speaking-background students. In Queensland, the curriculum was rewritten to make it focus on such issues as the environment, multiculturalism and social justice; all with a futures perspective to en-

sure that students were ready to embrace the brave new world of the politically correct.

Within Australia, most faculties of education set left-wing texts for study and the academics involved generally followed the 'party' line. Bill Hannan, Jean Blackburn, Dean Ashenden and, more recently, Simon Marginson were strong critics of the status quo in education. Many worked closely with teacher unions such as the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA) and the Australian Education Union (AEU), chaired or advised education bodies such as the Schools Commission and various State boards of education and wrote extensively in teacher journals promoting their cause. The following statement by Bill Hannan, one-time Director of Curriculum in the Victorian Education Department and Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS)—the national committee responsible for overseeing Australia's national curriculum—sums up much of what was being advocated:

We should try to achieve greater equality throughout society. I do not pretend that education is the only front to work on. I believe that income, status, privileges and so forth should be levelled as quickly as we can ... We don't have to wait for society to change before education can change. Education is part of society. By changing it, we help to change society.

(Hannan, 1985, page 61)

Teacher unions also defined the curriculum as an instrument to be used to overturn the capitalist system and to bring about what they defined as a more equitable and socially just society. Reflecting the work of the Marxist academic Althusser, the Australian Education Union's 1993 policy states that curriculum must take into account:

The pronounced inequality in the distribution of social, economic, cultural and political resources and power between social groups, which restricts the life development of many.

The role of the economy, the sexual division of labour, the dominant culture and the education system in reproducing inequality.

(AEU, 1993, page 2)

While there is an element of truth in such a critique—within society not everyone is as privileged or able to succeed as everyone else—the Left's solution to such matters is very much a product of its particular ideology. Equality of opportunity gave way to equality of outcomes, education ceased

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being impartial and disinterested and what Mark Latham (1997) criticizes as ‘social engineering’ was used in a heavy-handed, top-down way in an attempt to reshape society.

CO-OPTING THE CURRICULUM: THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

At the same time that the Left sought to change society by changing the education system, the school curriculum was also being co-opted by the progressive movement in education. Similarly to those on the Left, advocates of progressive education condemned the then-existing curriculum as totally unsatisfactory. During the 1970s and 1980s, across the English-speaking Western world, progressive teachers and academics argued for a child-centred, process approach to education where learning was based on what is immediately accessible and relevant. In part, arising out of the writings of Rousseau, the argument was that any attempt formally to teach children in a structured, systematic way was doomed to failure. This was because such approaches to teaching and learning were unnatural, deadening and destructive of the child’s innate desire and ability to learn. As stated by A.S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill:

Well, we set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this, we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction ... All it required was what we had—a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil being. For over forty years, this belief in the goodness of the child has never wavered; it rather has become a final faith.

(Neill, 1972, page 20)

Academic studies, a compulsory curriculum, examinations and the belief that education, by definition, required being initiated into an established body of knowledge, understanding and skills were forsaken as teachers embraced electives, integrated studies and an educational environment where they became ‘facilitators’ and children became the principal determinant in deciding what did and did not occur in the classroom. An example of this child-centred approach to education can be found in the principles adopted to inform the development of the New Zealand curriculum, where the

statement is made ‘that the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning’ (NZ Ministry of Education, 1994, page 7). Some writers associated with the de-schooling movement, such as Illich (1973) and Postman and Weingartner (1971), even went as far as arguing that traditional schools should be physically demolished and the focus of learning should be on co-operatives established in the local community. The benefit of such an educational experience being that learning would be immediately relevant and useful and students would cease being coerced into memorizing so-called arid and useless bits of information.

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Progressive education not only dramatically rethought the way the school system was managed and structured; just as important was the way in which progressive teachers redefined education to stress ‘process’. Taking from, and in many instances misinterpreting, the work of Jerome Bruner (1960), teachers argued that teaching and learning should move from emphasizing ‘content’ to emphasizing the skills associated with the ‘process’ of learning. According to this argument, it did not matter whether, in history for example, students learned about significant historical events, people or movements; rather, education should focus on particular skills such as gathering data and processing information. As content did not matter, such an approach had the added benefit of giving students the freedom to choose whatever content, if any, they thought they needed or were interested in. As stated by the Australian Schools Commission:

There is no reason to assume that the traditional subject fields, or high culture, are the only avenues through which thought may be developed or basic skills learned. The skills of assembling evidence in logical argument may be developed through any content about which people care enough, or may be brought to care enough, to exert themselves to use them.

(Australian Schools Commission, 1975, page 7)

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Within the progressive classroom the subject or discipline was secondary to nurturing self-esteem and helping children self-actualize. Such an approach explains why the formal structure of subjects like English and mathematics was forsaken. In primary schools, in particular, students were no longer required to memorize tables or to learn by rote and the more formal aspects of English, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar, were ignored in favour of creativity and a 'whole language' approach to literacy. History, as a discipline, was also forsaken as official curriculum documents like the Victorian *Studies of Society and Environment* stressed an integrated, inquiry-based approach to the curriculum involving a smorgasbord of subjects, including ecology, anthropology, Aboriginal studies, women's studies, environmental studies, multi-disciplinary studies, global studies, sociology and psychology.

Whereas traditional approaches to education stress the importance of competitive, graded assessment, progressive educators argued for less stressful and more so-called socially just forms of measuring student success. The Victorian Secondary Teachers Association's policy reflects this general movement when it argues for assessment that is 'descriptive, diagnostic and participatory'. The ideal is one where all students are guaranteed success, where student work is not compared against so-called absolute standards and where competition and excellence give way to celebrating the achievements of all students.

CO-OPTING THE CURRICULUM: THE WORK-BASED COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

While not as influential as the first two movements discussed, a third attempt to re-define the purpose of education and the work of schools can be found in the work-based competency movement. Within Australia, a number of reports, including the Finn (1991), Mayer (1992) and Carmichael (1992) reports, attacked schools for failing to produce a so-called highly skilled and adaptable workforce. Based on the belief that work practices were changing because of the advent of a knowledge-based society, one where information-related technology made traditional work practices obsolete, the argument is that schools are based on an environment more suited to the industrial age.

The argument was that if Australia is to be internationally competitive and able to survive and prosper in the new millennium, then education has to change. Instead of being based on established subjects or disciplines, the Mayer Report, in particular, puts forward the following seven competencies it argues are necessary for success in the workplace and for 'life-long' learning:

- collecting, analysing and organizing information;
- communicating ideas and information;
- planning and organizing activities;
- working with others and in teams;
- using mathematical ideas and techniques;
- solving problems; and
- using technology.

The emphasis is on generic skills and the assumption is that these can be developed outside the context of the established subjects and disciplines. Indeed, the conviction is that skills such as problem-solving and gathering information are transferable across a range of contexts and subject boundaries and that, once mastered, they allow students, and workers, to cope with any new situation or challenge. Forgotten is that analysing a poem, for example, to judge how successful it is in conveying something illuminating about human experience, requires an appreciation of language that cannot be acquired simply by learning how to process information. If it is accepted that various subjects and disciplines, or what Hirst (1974) refers to as 'forms of knowledge', have unique ways of ordering experience and structuring knowledge and understanding, then students need to study the structure of individual disciplines instead of mastering so-called generic skills.

The movement to work-based competencies, and the related promotion of vocational education in schools, is also a concern in that the distinction between academic studies and vocational studies is being lost. Whether it be the destruction of the technical school system in Victoria, which occurred

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under the Cain/Kirner Labor Government, and the subsequent push to make all students undertake a generalist secondary education, or the fact that Victorian senior school students working at McDonald's are eligible for bonus marks that contribute to tertiary entry scores, thus putting customer service on the same level as translating Virgil, the end result is that education is now synonymous with training.

Not only is education restricted to what is seen as immediately useful and utilitarian, but the culture of the society suffers as subjects such as history and literature are passed over in the rush to ensure that students acquire what are considered to be the necessary competencies to cope with the future workplace. As noted in the following quotation, there is also the added concern that the competency movement and the related vocational, education and training (VET) agenda involve a highly centralized and cumbersome bureaucratic process to ensure that schools do as they are told:

Whatever their intentions, uniformity and centralized control are inevitable in the kind of scheme that the Mayer committee and the Carmichael report envisage. . . . Apart from the constraints placed on desirable diversity in education and training, there is the risk that haunts any highly centralised scheme: the mistakes it makes infect the practice everywhere in the society.

(Crittenden, 1996, page 163)

CO-OPTING THE CURRICULUM: THE ATTACK OF THE POSTMODERN

During the 1960s and 1970s, education was influenced dramatically by both a left-wing critique and the progressive movement. A more recent attack on the status quo in education is represented by what can be broadly defined as the postmodern. While acknowledging the difficulty in defining such a complex and inherently ambiguous term, Richard Tarnas defines the postmodern this way:

The postmodern mind may be viewed as an open-ended, indeterminate set of attitudes that has been shaped by a great diversity of intellectual and cultural currents; these range from pragmatism, existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis to feminism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and postempiricist philosophy of science. It is recognized that human knowl-

edge is subjectively determined by a multitude of factors; that objective essences, or things-in-themselves, are neither accessible nor positable. The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain.

(Tarnas, 1991, page 395)

Drawing originally on the works of such French writers as Barthes (1977), Derrida (1978), Foucault (1980), Baudrillard (1981) and Lyotard (1984), the postmodern has had a dramatic impact on fields as diverse as architecture, cultural studies, media studies, linguistics, literature and education. Broadly speaking, the effect has been to undermine existing narratives; in particular, the concept of a Western civilization symbolized by a commitment to objectivity, truth and primacy of the rational mind. In the US, the expression 'culture wars' sums up the degree of hostility and acrimony evident in the way in which advocates of the postmodern have sought to impose their views on the Academy. Whether it be feminist at-

tacks on the misogynist nature of the literary classics, the argument by deconstructionists that it is impossible to gain agreement on the meaning of words, the conviction that all beliefs are ideologically driven or the argument by multiculturalists that all cultures deserve equal treatment and respect, the end result is that the truths and practices associated with a liberal/humanist view of education are held to be no longer preferable or tenable.

Within school education, in particular, in subjects such as English, the impact of the postmodern has been significant. The English literary critic Terry Eagleton (1983) not only argues that 'there is no document of culture which is not also a record of barbarism' (page 214), but also suggests that English teaching should be directed at 'the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production

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of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society' (page 211). The Australian Association for the Teachers of English (AATE) is also a staunch advocate of the new theories. Such publications as *The Making of Literature* (Reid, 1984) and *Reconstructing Literature Teaching* (Thomson, 1992) and the Association's journal, *English in Australia*, advocate feminist and deconstructivist approaches associated with the postmodern. The traditional approach to literary criticism associated with F.R. Leavis is condemned as 'ethnocentric, patriarchal and bourgeois' (Cranny-Francis, 1992) and a commitment to teaching students to read with discrimination and sensitivity is condemned in the following way:

It is essential that this focus on 'feelings' be deconstructed and exposed not only for its essentially repressive and conservatizing nature—these feelings are valued when aroused by readings which construct or enact dominant discourses (bourgeois, patriarchal, ethnocentric)—but also for its potentially devastating effect on those whose background (class, ethnicity, gender) does not promote the inculcation of these 'feelings'.

(Cranny-Francis, 1992, page 44)

A more recent article in the AATE journal goes one step further in undermining a traditional approach to literature by arguing that English teachers should introduce popular computer games to the classroom because 'Computer games, as lively and engaging texts, reward study in their own right, and are an intriguing instance of an evolving cultural form' (Beavis, 1998, page 44).

Language-teaching has also been targeted for radical change. Pam Gilbert (1991), for example, argues that language is 'the product of power and struggles for power' and that teachers, instead of teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar, need to expose the way language has been 'named, defined and dominated by masculinist discourses and institutions'. According to Ms Gilbert, students need to be taught to read 'against the grain' and to recognize that traditional approaches to English teaching enforce 'phallus-dominated heterosexuality and female dependence'. The result of this approach is that not only is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* condemned because of the way it promotes heterosexual love, but some academics also argue that the teachers should use the English classroom as a 'site' to teach students about the benefits of gay and lesbian lifestyles (see *English in Australia*, No. 112, July 1995).

More extreme advocates of deconstruction even go so far as to argue that it is impossible to restrict the meaning of words to a commonly agreed interpretation. Such is the subjective and relative nature of the reading act that there can be as many interpretations of particular words, or texts for that matter, as there are readers or listeners. Building on the work of the linguist Saussure, in particular on his belief that the relationship between a particular word (signifier) and what it is intended to represent (signified) is completely arbitrary, writers such as Derrida (1978) and Belsey (1980) argue that it is impossible ever to tie down or to pinpoint what it is one is actually reading. Reading does not involve understanding the meaning of particular words or sentences, rather words only suggest traces of other words and readers are faced with a continuous process of deferral as they attempt to follow a chain of traces that appear to be endless.

The result is that it is impossible for teachers to tell students that some readings can be wrong. As argued by the Australian *Statement on English for Australian Schools*, students must now be taught a 'knowledge of the way in which textual interpretation and understanding may vary according to cultural, social and personal differences'. It should be noted here that the Australian academics and teachers associated with the AATE are not alone in their enthusiastic adoption of the postmodern. In 1994, the US Department of Education cancelled the contract held by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to produce national standards in Language Arts because the draft material was vague, focused too much on process and lacked the required academic rigour.

History-teaching has also fallen victim to the postmodern. Once again, the US experience offers a good example of the dangers of centralizing curriculum control by attempting to design nationwide standards. The National Centre for History in the Schools (NCHS) was given the responsibility of designing the national history standards. On publication in 1995, the first three sets of standards were attacked for uncritically promoting a frag-

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mented, subjective view of history based on what was politically correct (see Arons, 1997, pages 20–26). Within the standards, traditional approaches to history were condemned as Eurocentric and patriarchal and the belief that American history symbolized a steady march towards greater equality and prosperity was forgotten as the rights of so-called victim groups were placed at centre stage.

History teaching in Australia has suffered a similar fate. In arguing for the place of the ‘new’ history, the argument is put that not only is it impossible to have a commonly agreed understanding of historical narrative:

One of the great developments in history teaching has been the emphasis through the VCE (the Victorian senior school certificate) on the nature of representations, or versions, of history. There is no single version of history which can be presented to students. History is a version of the past which varies according to the person and the times ... So not only is there no single version of history, but each generation re-interprets the past in the light of its own values and attitudes.

(Gurry and Lewis, 1992, pages 16–17)

but that students must be taught that traditional teaching-approaches disempower and marginalize so-called oppressed and dispossessed groups. As highlighted by the debates about what has become known as the ‘black armband’ view of history, the reality is that mainstream approaches to history are subverted by an interpretation based on ‘gender, ethnicity and class’ and which gives priority to a feminist, multicultural and neo-Marxist interpretation of history.

While it is difficult to measure the extent to which the postmodern has affected classroom practice, it is the case that academics, professional associations and official curriculum documents reflect much of the prevailing orthodoxy. That such a situation is cause for unease is especially true if one agrees with Brian Crittenden, when he states:

If we are to accept the doctrines of postmodernism and its interpretation of contemporary society, anything like systematic education would be impossible. Although the details vary, the fundamental problems with all versions of postmodernism are their advocacy of a radical form of relativism and the dissolution of the self in the montage of ‘discourses’ or ‘language games’ by which we happen to be shaped at any given time.

(Crittenden, 1996, page 41)

CO-OPTING THE CURRICULUM: THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT

Since the mid-to-late 1960s, schools in Australia, New Zealand, England and the US have had to cope with a series of educational fads and movements that have thought to redefine the nature and purpose of education. The most recent relates to what in the US is termed the ‘standards movement’ (‘standards’ are defined as ‘what students should know and be able to do’, this equates in Australia, with what are termed ‘learning outcomes’). In part, the ‘standards movement’ represents a fundamental shift from measuring educational success in terms of inputs, the amount of money spent, to measuring how successful schools are in terms of ‘outputs’, what students have achieved.

Given the failure of the progressive, school-based approach to curriculum development during the seventies and eighties, governments and education departments began to impose greater accountability by putting forward a much stricter outline of what students should know and be able to achieve. The impetus for this change in the US came as a result of reports such as *A Nation at Risk*, which stated that

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people

(National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1993, page 5)

The outburst against what in the US was termed ‘dumbing down’, was also heard in England and Australia. Parents, public interest groups and politicians all began to argue that educational standards had fallen and that students needed to be challenged by a far more rigorous and sound educational experience. A second impetus for the ‘stand-

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ards movement' was the impact of international tests such as the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). Such tests ranked the performance of students from particular countries and allowed governments to compare how successful their education systems were. In the US, the response, first at the national level and then at the State level, was to design a curriculum that stated in an explicit way what students were expected 'to know and be able to do' (content standards) and also the expected 'levels of achievement' (performance standards). Australia's solution to the problem was represented by the national statements and profiles developed in the eight so-called key learning areas. While not pretending to be a syllabus, the national profiles sought to detail expected learning outcomes over eight levels covering years 1 to 12. Since the release of the national statements and profiles in the mid-1990s, the various State and Territory education departments have designed equivalent curriculum documents for their own systems.

In the same way that previously centrally-imposed curriculum initiatives outlined in this paper floundered, the 'standards movement' has also failed to live up to expectations. In the US, the 'standards movement' was criticized for promoting statements about the curriculum that were vague, imprecise and lacking in academic rigour, and for being too cumbersome to be implemented in the classroom (see Shanker 1993, 1994; Manno 1994). In the words of the introduction to Manno's paper (1994), the learning outcomes associated with the 'standards movement' emphasize 'values, attitudes, and behaviour and often reflect quasi-political or ideologically correct positions'. The attacks against the 'standards movement' reached their peak when the History Standards Project and the Standards Project for the English Language Arts were condemned for being nebulous, ideologically biased and focusing on the process of learning to the detriment of worthwhile content (see Marzano and Kendall, 1997, pages 1–17).

The same type of critique has been levelled at the New Zealand frameworks curriculum (see Irwin 1994, 1999) and the Australian national statements and profiles (see Marsh, 1994, Chapter 7 for an outline of the criticisms against the national curriculum). While the rhetoric surrounding the new curriculum was couched in such terms as 'standards', 'accountability' and 'world's best curriculum', the reality was that nothing appeared to have been learned from the failures of the previous 20 to 30 years.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As outlined in this paper, the history of education in Australia since the late 1960s has been one of different movements seeking to define the purpose of education and to control the work of schools. (It should be noted that events in Australia mirror similar developments in the US, England and New Zealand.) In a diverse, locally controlled education system—where schools are free from the dictates of centralized bureaucracies and governments seeking to enforce their short-term political, social and economic agendas—such attempts to influence education may not be cause for concern. If schools, and their communities, are free to define their own curricula and to reject whatever is the latest bureaucratic grand plan or educational fad, then in diversity there would be strength.

The reality is, though, and notwithstanding the rhetoric of devolution and school-based control, that the system in Australia is highly centralized and subject to bureaucratic and government interference. Whether it be the imposition of 'whole language' approaches to literacy, and the subsequent fact that thousands of primary school students are illiterate; the development of the national statements and profiles, and the danger that if all States and Territories had adopted them, all would have the same mediocre, politically correct curriculum; or the approaches to assessment, which guarantee that all students are successful on the premise that to fail students is bad for their self-esteem, again and again schools have been made to conform to the one correct line.

Given the current movement in all Australian systems towards school-based management, devolving power to school councils and reducing the power of centralized bureaucracies, one might con-

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clude that things are beginning to change. The reality is that they are not. Instead of schools gaining greater autonomy, and parents being faced with a more diverse, open system in which the 'product' being purchased reflects the needs and expectations of the 'market place', the power of the bureaucracy and the state is still immense. Australian schools are made to follow State-determined curricula; in fact, in Western Australia this is enforced by a recent Act of Parliament, and new

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acceptability methods ensure that schools follow what has been mandated. Whereas senior school certificates were once controlled by universities, on the belief that education was too important to be left to government, the situation is now one where the final years of schooling are controlled by quasi-government statutory bodies appointed by the minister of the day.

Across the Western, English-speaking world, over the last 10 to 20 years, education systems have undergone significant reform. Whether they are charter schools in the US and Canada, grant-maintained schools in England or Victoria's Schools of the Future, the intention has been to reduce state control over schools and to open schools to the 'market place'. Discussion about such initiatives has focused on matters of management, organization and structure and the assumption is that parents and students have greater choice and freedom. In relation to the curriculum this is not the case. The question then becomes: 'What benefit is there in being able to choose from a range of schools, if all are forced to follow the same centrally-determined curriculum?'

trally determined and state-controlled curricula might not always be as powerful as it currently is.

In the US, the explosion in the home school movement clearly demonstrates that many parents are voting with their feet and deciding to provide an educational environment free from state coercion. A second factor reinforcing the influence of consumer choice is the so-called 'charter movement' in the US. By allowing parents, and others in the community, to manage and control their own schools, the centralized control exerted by the state, both in management and curriculum, is being reduced. In Australia, the fact that approximately 30 per cent of students now attend non-government schools also suggests that parents are deciding to place their children in independent schools free from the excesses represented by intrusive bureaucracies and state-sponsored educational fads.

The impact of the new technologies, particularly computers and the Internet, allows parents and students to seek knowledge and understanding from around the globe and also act to subvert the territorial boundaries represented by the state. The possibility now exists where those with access to the Internet can

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make use of tutors, curriculum resources and educational programmes that transcend their immediate physical location. It is also the case that teachers and schools can utilize curriculum syllabuses, frameworks and assessment regimes from a range of education systems. Conceivably, in the same way that many schools in Australia have introduced the International Baccalaureate as an alternative to existing state-controlled senior school certificates, schools will be free to choose those syllabuses and frameworks that are considered to represent 'best-practice'. Instead of schools in Victoria, for example, having to use the state-designed Curriculum and Standards Framework, some might decide that there are better curriculum guides to be found elsewhere. The start of this internationalization of the curriculum has begun in New York where some schools have decided to adopt

POSTSCRIPT

While the research for, and the writing of, this paper was being undertaken, a number of trends have arisen which suggest that the influence of cen-

the Singapore mathematics curriculum and related textbooks. (The impetus for this is that US students perform extremely poorly in international tests such as the TIMSS, whereas Singapore consistently performs at the top of the table.) It is also the case that one of New Zealand's leading state schools, Auckland Grammar, recently decided to

offer the Cambridge Certificate as an alternative to the new senior school certificate, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). The argument used is that the nature of the NCEA is so experimental and educationally unsound that students must be given an alternative if they are to excel.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Kevin Donnelly (BArts, DipEd, MEd, PhD (Education), La Trobe University) is Director of a Melbourne-based consultancy group, Education Strategies. Dr Donnelly has taught in both government and non-government schools and lectured in Education at La Trobe University. His PhD thesis defends a liberal/humanist view of education against the types of attacks outlined in this paper. Dr Donnelly has published over 150 articles in the daily media and professional journals and appears on state and national radio.