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How curriculum history can enhance teacher understanding, and why it may never get the opportunity to do so

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ABSTRACT
This paper argues that a study of curriculum history is vital to teacher education programmes. Drawing upon the work of Cornbleth, Grundy and others, it opts for a comprehensive view of curriculum as a construct shaped by political, social, economic and demographic conditions chat can be completely understood only by reference to historical factors. The paper goes on to suggest, however, that a number of difficulties stand in the way of critical curriculum history teaching and research. These include problems within the field related to the influence of theory and ideology on history, and constraints upon historians, including the impact on university management structures of both Right and Left-wing ideologies.

Whilst curriculum history has the potential to facilitate the critical understanding chat teacher education programmes sometimes lack, it could be said chat this potential is not fully utilised. This paper aims to: (1) outline some ways in which historical understandings can inform teacher education programmes and; (2) advance some reasons as to why curriculum history as a field has largely failed to have a greater impact.

Informing teacher education

Good teaching and research can help to ensure chat curriculum history fosters an appreciation of the curriculum as a socio-political construct. As such, it provides a counter to the 'official' view of curriculum emanating from various state agencies and affirmed uncritically by some teacher education providers. A statement from *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (1993) claims:

> The school curriculum will give all students the opportunity of a broad and balanced education throughout their years of schooling. It will provide them with opportunities to undertake continuing study in the seven essential learning areas ... It will provide coherent goals and learning experiences which will enable students to achieve their potential, to continue learning throughout life, and to play their full part in our democratic society and in a competitive world economy (Ministry of Education, 1993: 6).

All too often in teacher education, definitions of this type are accepted simply because they originate from an official source. The only thing to be regarded as problematic here is the effective implementation of curriculum goals. The goals themselves are to be accepted with little appreciation of the fact chat they are embedded within world views chat promote a particular organisation of knowledge. It follows that historians of education would have little place in

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programmes that subscribe to such a narrow view of curriculum beyond supplying a few selected "acts and faces". Cornbleth (1990) is however one scholar who has argued for a much more comprehensive view of curriculum. Cornbleth provides a detailed explanation of the ways in which *milieu* (including social, political, economic and demographic factors) impacts upon the work of teaching and learning. This may sound straightforward enough, but the need for student teachers to be taught the historical skills chat can assist chem in asking appropriate questions concerning such influences on curriculum can be better ascertained from Cornbleth's attempt to draw a distinction between *nominal context*, which consists of factors 'out there' that might influence curriculum, and *relevant context*, i.e. chose aspects of the nominal context which can be shown to actually influence curriculum in a particular instance, either directly or indirectly (Cornbleth, 1990: 27). This considerably more complex and useful view of curriculum assigns historians of education a critical role in teacher education programmes. Moreover, in a recently edited publication on curriculum and social context, it has been persuasively argued that curriculum researchers and foundations researchers must work together to promote a better understanding of teaching on the part of beginning teachers, through a critical analysis of both curriculum and social issues (Hatton, 1994: xvi). This argument has stimulated one contributor to the volume to call for a greater recognition from teacher educators of the dynamic interaction between teachers, students, subject-matter and *milieu*, in order to counter the dominant view that curriculum documents represent merely an expression of the intentions of the major stakeholders (Grundy, 1994: 30-31).

Viewed in this wider, more comprehensive and critical context, the curriculum becomes a site of contestation and struggle, involving not just governments and politicians, but bureaucracies, curriculum reformers, syllabus designers, teachers, parents and students. One recent publication, *Reshaping Culture, Knowledge and Learning*, sets out several broad themes that, if employed critically, may challenge those who enter teacher education programmes to view the curriculum in a more dynamic way (O'Neill, Clark and Openshaw, 2004). What follows is a modified list of those themes.

a) All curriculum documents are informed or shaped by particular views of the world. It is arguable that very few ideas and philosophies in curriculum are entirely new, but neither do they simply spring into being. Frequently, curriculum documents in one country are influenced by existing curricula in other countries that are considered to provide valid models for emulation. In nineteenth century New Zealand, the United Kingdom tended to provide the model for curriculum reform. However, Inspector-General George Hogben's ten month visit to Europe and North America in 190],, which on his return resulted in an extensive report on schooling abroad, initiated a movement towards more internationally diverse sources for curriculum inspiration (see for instance; Roth, 1952).

b) Curriculum documents possess an underlying ideology, whether this is stated or not. Often there is more than one ideology present in a single curriculum document. For instance, successive governments and their educational bureaucracies have come increasing~ to view schools, rather than family or church, as sites where the most cherished values of society are to be inculcated to future citizens (McGee, 1998). Given this social and political function, curriculum documents are almost by definition, social and political documents. However, many educators have also viewed schools as places where students might be taught to question established values, ideals and structures. Exactly which values, ideals and structures should be open to question, and which should be upheld by teachers, is however fiercely contested (Openshaw, 1998).

c) Curriculum designers must take account of the world beyond the school. This is especially true of the school's relationship with the labour market. Since the very first national curriculum, this dynamic has created an historic tension. On the one hand there is the liberal educator's dream of a broad, liberal education for personal growth, academic attainment, and inquiring minds. On the other, there are the constraints involved in being responsible for the efficient production of a

workforce to serve economic goals. This tension is most evident at the terminal point of exit - where the school-leaver exits formal education in order to enter the labour market (McKenzie, et al., 1996).

d) All curriculum documents are conceived, designed, and implemented within a specific administrative and bureaucratic context that is continuously changing. This process is more visible when actual structures are changed by legislation (i.e., 1877 and 1989), although it is just as significant when the structure itself remains constant, but power relationships within that structure change. One instance of the latter was the growing influence of the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association on the secondary curriculum from the late 1960s (Jesson, 1995). From the mid-1970s, the NZPPTA example was followed by interest groups such as feminists and Maori so that, by the 1980s, it is perhaps more accurate to talk about a curriculum of interests, rather than a curriculum of subject disciplines.

e) Any sound historical discussion of curriculum processes must take into account that there are inequalities within power relationships. For instance, no matter what structures are in place, not everyone is accorded the same degree of input into curriculum design. There are those who design the curriculum, those who implement the curriculum, and those who consume the curriculum. New Zealand has traditionally adhered to a centre-periphery model of curriculum design and implementation. During the post-World War Two era this model was progressively modified by the inclusion of first, school inspectors, and then, representatives from the teachers unions. This process of inclusion, however, was to lead to charges of provider-capture from both Right and Left-wing critics. From 1989, the contractual model of curriculum design and implementation that replaced the earlier system created additional complications, such as sub-contracting, that served to further obscure the actual process.

f) Despite a degree of de-professionalisation over recent years, those who teach the curriculum exert a key influence that governments, bureaucrats, and curriculum developers ignore at their peril. For instance, nearly a hundred years ago, Hogben wrote almost single-handedly a curriculum for public primary schools that was in many ways far ahead of its time. Many teachers were inadequately trained, class sizes were large, and the sheer breadth of the new syllabus with its emphasis on 'natural' language teaching and fieldwork in science, made it simply unworkable (Roth, 1952: 102-103). The resulting outcry from many teachers including the New Zealand Educational Institute was such that Hogben came close to being irredeemably discredited. Years later, another former Chief Executive, C. E. Beeby warned that: "Qualitative changes in classroom practice will occur only when the teachers understand them, feel secure with them, and accept them as their own." (Beeby, 1979).

g) Finally, it should be appreciated that debates over the curriculum involve considerable manipulation of opinion. The report, *A Review of the Core Curriculum for Schools* (NZ Department of Education, 1984) was written by a team of largely conservative educators approved by the then National Minister of Education, the Hon. Mervyn Wellington. The document claimed to reflect majority public opinion, as opposed to the views of an entrenched educational bureaucracy that was allegedly supported by the teachers' unions. Following Labour's victory in the 1984 election, however, the new Minister of Education, Russell Marshall, lost no time in calling together another curriculum review team. The result was the considerably more left-leaning report, *The Curriculum Review* (NZ Department of Education, 1987). This document claimed to more accurately reflect both teacher opinion and public sentiment than did its predecessor. In both instances, however, historians are justified in remaining sceptical of such claims until they have a fuller appreciation of the political dynamics surrounding curriculum committee processes and a rigorous method of ascertaining 'public opinion'.

Constraints on historical research

The above discussion confirms that curriculum history can materially contribute to the understanding teachers have concerning the curriculum. All too frequently, however, our students leave teacher education programmes with knowledge about what is in contemporary curriculum documents, but possessing little inclination to be critical of them, and even less understanding of the historical background to curriculum so essential to true professionalism. This paper now considers some reasons why curriculum history has not been more influential in teacher education programmes.

a) Problems from within Curriculum History

Before we look beyond curriculum history, we need first to turn our attention to the field itself. *As* we have seen, it would be difficult to argue persuasively that ideologies should not influence historians, or that theory should have no place in history. However, it can be argued that the links between history, ideology and theory can become counter-productive unless we come to view these links more critically than we have done in the past. In particular, the presentist bias of much New Zealand curriculum history has resulted in historians outside professional educational circles discounting it as a field for serious academic study. The problem is by no means a recent one. Some fifty years of curriculum history research has given rise to several distinct, sometimes oppositional approaches, each in its way dominated by contemporary educational theory, whether or not this is stated explicitly (McCulloch, 1992: 12-13).

During the 1950s and 1960s, curriculum history as a legitimate field of inquiry in its own right, scarcely existed. Those who researched curriculum were often deeply immersed in the practice of teaching, sharing a conviction that the educational past should play an instrumental role in furthering contemporary liberal educational reform. Two books on the primary school curriculum written by J. L. Ewing exemplify the best in what has been termed the Liberal-Progressive approach to curriculum history, whilst also underscoring its essential limitations (Ewing, 1960, 1970). Ewing went beyond earlier commentators in seeing the curriculum as a process rather than as a collection of syllabus documents. However, he largely viewed the Department as a progressive bureaucracy, dedicated to enlightened curriculum reform. He did not look explicitly at the politics of curriculum, nor did he systematically examine the relationship between curriculum change and the wider society (McCulloch, 1992: 12-13).

From the late 1970s, however, a new and profoundly influential phase in the study of curriculum history began to emerge in New Zealand. This phase was to be distinguished by a far more explicit acknowledgement of political and social factors. The new sociology depicted the curriculum as a social construct, organised in the interests of the powerful, and designed to hold down the powerless. The New Zealand version largely followed its European antecedents, but added indigenous ingredients. Far from being neutral, objective bodies of knowledge, the New Zealand school curriculum was now condemned as a device designed to uphold the hegemonic interests of the dominant Pakeha male culture. It followed that the main task of curriculum historians was to illustrate how the curriculum had historically discriminated against women, Maori and the working classes through the deliberate exclusion of other, equally legitimate forms of knowledge. Roy Shuker's highly influential book, *The One Best System?* remains an outstanding example of this approach (Shuker, 1987). The nature of educational bureaucracy also came under critical scrutiny. G.I.A.R. Khan argued that the former Department was the effective lynchpin of a reactionary centre-periphery mod~ of educational change. It effectively defused potentially radical curriculum innovations, the processes of innovation being refracted through a series of political agendas ranging from those of the centralised bureaucracy through to the micro politics of the school (Khan, 1990).

In 1988, however, the Picot Committee drew upon this critical theory tradition to identify a number of serious weaknesses with existing structures. These were stated to be: the over-centralisation of decision making, complexity, a lack of consumer information and choice, a lack of effective management practices, and widespread feelings of powerlessness (*Report of the Taskforce to Review Education Administration*, 1988). The Ministry of Education has adopted a relatively similar position. Its spokespersons seek legitimacy for the post-1987 reforms by attempting to portray the era of the former Department as one in which maintenance of the status quo was the primary objective. In 1992 a Ministry of Education background paper attempting a broad historical overview of curriculum development concluded of the early post World War Two period that:

> The development of education was predictable in these affluent times (*1949-72*). There was no attempt by government or Department of Education to reform the education system. Rather, with Beeby still at the helm for much of the period, they undertook liberal developments to consolidate the reforms of the Frazer (sic) era and to implement the recommendations of the Thomas Committee (Historical overview, c.1992).

At the same time the Ministry has sought to enhance its public image as a responsive and innovative new-age bureaucracy by simply ignoring key elements in our educational past. Thus, in June 2000, *New Zealand Education Gazette* reporter Matt Velde quoted Ministry Curriculum Facilitator, Murray Brown, as having said that: " ... curriculum integration represents an opportunity for schools to take a new approach to curriculum delivery and to organize and manage the curriculum so that it leads to better learning outcomes for children" (Velde, 2000: 1). The implication here is, of course, that prior to the coming of the Ministry, curriculum integration was virtually unknown.

To further complicate matters, a decade after the Picot reforms there are signs of a reassessment of the former education system that had only a few years before been condemned as classist, sexist and racist. The Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC), launched in October 1997 to combat the influence of market forces and competition in education, subsequently promoted the view that: "People need to know the history of public education, which is that it was put in place to deal with the problems created by a dog-eat-dog society" (Watkin, 1997: 31). For QEPC, the curriculum is merely an integral part of 'the public good' that is state education, now rehabilitated and cleansed of its formerly negative connotations.

The problem for curriculum historians, however, is that changes of stance that first allow only for the curriculum to be designed and implemented by well intentioned people, then allow only for it to be designed and implemented by those with malevolent intent, and finally encourage a drift back to something approximating the first position, do little to enhance the field's overall academic credibility.

Rapid ideologically-driven shifts within educational history as a whole have also contributed to the often negative view towards educational historians that are held by historians within history departments. In turn, this has impacted upon the status of curriculum history. In the United Kingdom, for instance, historians working within university history departments have frequently and sometimes justifiably dismissed the history produced in university education departments as " ... impoverished and unsophisticated" (Richardson, 1999: 130-131). As early as 1976, Sir Geoffrey Elton contemptuously denounced teachers colleges as strongholds of heavily deterministic Leftist history, produced by educationalists whose main interest lay in ransacking the past in the interests of supporting the radical reform of contemporary schooling (Elton, 1977). Even more telling was the criticism that emanated from the Left. Brian Simon, a well-respected British Marxist educational historian, was one among several such researchers who attacked erstwhile colleagues whose increasingly influential but overly simplistic determinism was viewed as having seriously undermined the Left's intellectual credibility (Simon, 1977).

Similar concerns have continued to be expressed periodically in the United Kingdom. In 1983, Harold Silver, a leading educational historian influential on both sides of the Atlantic, contended

that many British educational historians had over-articulated a strongly Left-wing ideology. The problem, he felt, was epitomised in much of the work produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham (Silver, 1983). According to Silver, the result of overly partisan and polemical approaches was to further marginalise curriculum history in the eyes of policymakers, the public and a substantial portion of the teaching profession.

Likewise in New Zealand, similar claims have been made. A 1998 book by Graham and Sue Butterworth has argued that the post-1987 educational reforms were the result of indigenous historical processes. Consequently the reforms enjoyed more public support than had been permitted by overly doctrinaire educational historians, who had allegedly allowed themselves to be captured by their more ideologically persuaded professional colleagues in university education departments and colleges of education (Butterworth and Butterworth, 1998). Such charges were strongly refuted by educational historians, who in turn challenged the Butterworths' own claims to objective neutrality (Lee and Lee, 1999). Both charge and counter-charge have some validity. It could also be argued, however, that the last decade or so has seen New Zealand historians of education place an increased emphasis on the production of empirically based studies, where the selective and critical application of theory has taken place as a result of inductive rather than deductive reasoning (Openshaw, 1995; McKenzie, Lee and Lee, 1996).

b) The Adverse Research Environment

Educational historians in general, and curriculum historians in particular, are by no means solely to blame for their failure to have more impact on teacher education. Looking beyond curriculum history, it soon becomes clearly evident that the research environment both within and beyond teacher education is increasingly hostile to qualitative research in general. This paper briefly reviews two reasons for this adverse state of affairs. Whilst the first impacts upon all forms of qualitative research, it is the coalescence of both that conspire to make the writing of curriculum history a difficult and sometimes risky undertaking.

i. *Managerialism, and the Just-get-on-with-it' school of teacher education.* The first and arguably the most intractable problem curriculum historians face is the sharply increased emphasis on classroom relevance, narrowly defined, chat in turn can be linked to the rise of a management culture in tertiary institutions. These trends are by no means confined to New Zealand. In the United Kingdom, Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector for Education, asked in his 1998/99 Annual Report:

> Why then, is so much time and energy wasted in research that complicates what ought to be straightforward ... If standards are to continue to rise we need decisive management action, locally and nationally that concentrates attention on the two imperatives that really matter: the drive to improve teaching and strengthen leadership ... The challenge now is to expose the emptiness of education theorizing that obfuscates the classroom realities that really matter (Office for Standards in Education, 2000: 21).

Likewise in New Zealand, the drive for research possessing so-called classroom relevance has not only dried up a steadily diminishing pool of Ministry funding for qualitative research, but has also seen teacher education institutions scrambling to offer research projects chat conform to priorities set by the educational bureaucracy. Moreover, there is an increasing institutional tension between research that simply seeks better ways to implement Ministry and government sponsored goals, and research chat serves to critique those goals from wider socio-political perspectives.

In turn, the rise of the 'just-get-on-with-it' school of teacher education has become closely associated with the culture of managerialism that now permeates tertiary institutions. & Mark Olssen has recently maintained, the culture of managerialism in tertiary institutions has brought new forms of surveillance and control, in which genuine academic freedom has been further eroded. The result is: "a deintellectualised discourse of competency-based training which displaces professional

judgement and ethics, as well as the forms of scholarship associated traditionally with the activities of the public intellectual" (Olssen, 2002: 55).

ii. *The power of dominant ideologies to discourage and condemn.* The problems curriculum historians face are by no means confined to Right-wing ideologies. Australian-based historian, Keith Windschuttle has claimed that, from the mid-1980s, postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminist studies, cultural studies and critical theory have expanded to become the scholarly orthodoxy within most Western universities (Windschuttle, 1996). In the face of a dual onslaught from the new managerialism and the anti-disciplinary bias of former radicals, who often came to occupy senior positions within the universities, humanities and social science departments rapidly dwindled. Those who survived, historians included, were often under pressure to abandon the search for objectivity and truth, turn their backs on empirical research, and instead embrace anti-realism and relativism (Windschuttle, 1996: 10-11). Theories became more important than evidence, and archival research was relegated to being simply another form of discourse (18).

The evidence suggests chat New Zealand universities have not escaped these trends. Moreover, it is arguable that they are even more pervasive within colleges of education and newly merged tertiary institutions. A report on teacher education by Australian academic, Geoffrey Partington, claimed that widespread one-sidedness in the treatment of ethnic and gender issues had resulted in indoctrinative courses that had little academic credibility (Partington, 1997). Challenging such views within teacher education institutions, however, is rendered highly problematical for curriculum historians. This is because many providers attempt to both embrace government and Ministry priorities, whilst retaining a politically correct commitment to equity issues that are held to reflect enlightened professional opinion.

For curriculum historians working within teacher education this has given rise to a matrix of associated problems. We face a renewed drive for so-called classroom relevance at the expense of qualitative and critical research, especially where Ministerial contracts are involved. We are obliged to endure managerial and institutional endorsements of positions that are themselves ironically derived from ideologies such as multiculturalism and postmodernism in a manner that permits neither criticism nor the advancement of alternative views on such potentially thorny topics as the impact of colonialism, or debating the causes of ethnic disadvantage. That such work continues to be carried out is testimony to the intellectual courage of such scholars as Barry (2001), Howe (2001), Te Maire Tau (2001), and Rata (2004). We are confronted at every turn, in both teaching and research, with the intransigent neoliberalism of what might be termed 'institutionalised busno-management.' The resulting matrix serves to discourage empirical research that does not 'fit in' with existing priorities and preconceptions, especially where there are perceived threats to the institution's commercial interests. Not surprisingly, whether the topic is New Zealand's colonial past, interpreting the Holocaust, or offering perspectives on Maori education history, historians and philosophers working within the tertiary sector tend to be singled out for explosions of collective wrath. This is precisely because the questions posed by those working within these core disciplines, rigorously pursued, are particularly embarrassing for the new brokers of power and knowledge.

It is undoubtedly true that genuinely research-based curriculum history has indeed the potentiality to transform teacher education programmes by encouraging students to problematise key and controversial issues chat they will face in the classroom. The barriers I have referred to in this paper, nevertheless suggest that this potential will continue to go largely unrealised. However, while the difficulties that stand in the way are formidable, it is essential that curriculum historians continue to undertake empirical research chat employs inductive reasoning *and* utilises primary sources to the fullest degree. Such research might go a long way to addressing the criticism that curriculum specialists have little to say about the historical or political dimensions of recent changes in the school curriculum, concentrating instead on how to implement the changes, train teachers, or develop "pedagogic content knowledge" (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 1). So, let's get out there

and do our best to produce good, scholarly curriculum history. After all, we have only our jobs to lose.

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