

## NSW Curriculum Reform: The White Paper — Excellence and Equality

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### Metherell's educational 'reforms'

On the 27th November 1989 Premier Greiner launched the White Paper *Excellence and equity: New South Wales curriculum reform*. I was targeted by the government's marketing machine to receive a personal copy of the White Paper having written one of the thousand submissions to the November 1988 discussion paper. Not that I minded so prompt delivery of a policy document; if nothing else the Minister, Dr Terry Metherell, is putting paper into hands better than any previous minister. While this approach might be designed as a publicity stunt it does allow those interested to read for themselves what the government is planning.

Before responding to the curriculum proposals listed in the White Paper I will acknowledge that there have been some worthwhile outcomes during Metherell's reign. The research conducted, however inappropriately, for the 1988 – 89 Scott, Carrick and White Paper publications, and a score of other policy reviews within the NSW Department of Education, has accurately targeted many of the problems which too many contemporary practitioners and commentators pretend do not exist. These problems include the declining status and credibility of government schools leading to an increase in private schooling, the problems of teacher stress, low morale related to income, the inordinately large and top-heavy educational bureaucracy, uncoordinated and continual changes to public examinations such as the HSC, and misconceptions about the nature of school curricula.

Many of the Liberal government's solutions, however, do not sharply focus on the nature of the identified problems but cast glances over their shoulders towards the conservative ideology of the incumbent minister. Yet it is ridiculous to sneer at Metherell for being ideological. One of the problems with the school-level movement of the 1980s was that the philosophy informing relevant policy was not widely, clearly or publicly articulated. Although one may disagree with the philosophical impetus and practical consequences of Metherell's decisions, at least the documents are out in the open to question, challenge and review by each of us from our own ideological stance.

For those not close to events in NSW during 1987 – 88, the NSW government introduced these 'reforms': the Year 10 School Certificate testing of English and Mathematics was reintroduced and will include Science in 1990; basic skills testing in Years 3 and 6 was trialled and will operate for all relevant students from 1990; the Higher School Certificate [HSC] document included an aggregate mark (to the disadvantage of students not seeking tertiary entrance); new 'fair' discipline codes were voted on at school-level; Leading Teachers were appointed at executive level to oversee staff

development; promotion by merit was made legislatively possible and partially introduced; school zones were abolished (though staffing has severely restricted any actual movement across zones); 200 of the state's 'best' final year student teachers were targeted and offered immediate employment in favourable locations; the concept of comprehensive secondary schooling was replaced by that of specialisation through the introduction of senior high schools, selective high schools, technology high schools and the public citation of 74 schools as Centres of Excellence. Most of these actions were based on Kenneth Baker's fiddling with British education with little apparent effort to learn from his mistakes.

### The Scott and Carrick reports

Conservative ideology was also prominent in the Scott *Schools renewal plan* (June, 1989) which proposed the theory of reversing the control of schools through devolution of responsibility to regional and school levels while merely shuffling the chairs around new leased office space. While all the senior executive of the Department supposedly resigned in order to face comparative assessment and interviews for restructured positions, there are few new faces to be seen. All of this was justified so the government could sell off the highly desirable Department of Education head office site, swinging more prime state assets into private hands.

The Carrick Review (September, 1989) put in place a number of recommendations to rewrite the 1987 Labor Government Education and Public Instruction Act in favour of private schools. Carrick also listed six key learning areas as a minimum curriculum: English, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Creative and Practical Arts, Personal Development, Health and Fitness, Human Society and Its Environment (including Modern Languages). To its credit, the Carrick Review recommended the enhancement of early childhood education and removing the aggregate score from the HSC credential. In late November the White Paper on curriculum, 'Excellence and Equity', was released.

It is possible that these actions have produced a set of conditions which could enable constructive change. After a decade of general disinterest, responsibility for public education is once again high on the list of political priorities — and prominent in media headlines. While this response might seem like thanking Genghis Khan for burning your house down, Metherell has provided the opportunity for arguing about the appropriateness and justness of his actions. For example, while agreeing with the notion that what was happening to curriculum at the school level was not clearly understood in the community, we should argue against the government's interpretation that the problem was 'disturbing deficiencies in the quality, content and development of curriculum' (p 6) [1]. Whether Metherell listens

or not is largely irrelevant; it is the public who will decide who wins the debate — even though this might not be until the election after the next.

### The demise of 'Other approved studies'

The potential for setting in train a process of pragmatic school renewal that takes the politicians and media barons at their word might be enhanced by information from teacher-as-researcher studies. My 1989 submission to the 1988 discussion paper derived from recently completed action research in a government secondary school in Western Sydney. In 1986 this school was noted by the NSW Department of Education and the Commonwealth Schools Commission as demonstrating exemplary curriculum practices. During 1986–88 my research explored this context through action research and an analysis of the convergence between teacher and student cultures achieved through negotiated curriculum development. The research traced the development of 50 school-based courses which were offered to students from Year 8 through to Year 12 and explored the impact this process had on other aspects of school policy and organisation.[2] It is precisely this degree of school-based action that the White Paper intends to crush. Proposal 14 (p 24) states:

To achieve a more appropriate balance between Board determined and Board approved courses the Board of Studies will have, as a three year goal, the reduction of the current 10 000 OAS [Other Approved Study] courses for years 11 – 12 to around 500. A similar balance... for years 9–10 should be achieved within the same time scale.

Further, senior bureaucrats will appropriate OAS subject matter into what the department calls Content Approved Courses. Twelve of these are already offered to HSC candidates. Proposal 12 states:

The new Board of Studies will take immediate action to improve the effectiveness of its coordination and rationalisation of OAS courses. It will accelerate the development of content approved courses

In order to offer a CAC, schools simply tick the boxes on a standardised form and ZAP! they have an 'alternative' senior curriculum. What is missing, of course, is the crucial local negotiation of content and assessment and the power that such a process presents to students, staff and parents. While there has been enormous replication of content in OAS courses, the Carpenter study suggests that it is important that content decisions are made locally. More significantly, the research suggests that it is teacher and student control over assessment offered in school-based course structures which act as the major catalyst in transforming traditional classrooms into ones which are innovative, negotiated, constructive and reflective. In the 1990s, the informal nature of school level control of assessment is to vanish. Proposal 15 reads:

The Board of Secondary Education will review its guidelines for the assessment of OAS courses and

incorporate a requirement for assessment by formal [original emphasis] school examination as well as by assignments, essays and other coursework.

### Teacher deskilling

Our concern, therefore, should not be about the actual numbers of OAS courses but about the disempowerment and de-professionalisation of teachers which such a process of reduction will ensure occurs. What it does for the government is to put teachers 'back in their place', a task made easier by concurrently increasing their class sizes, workloads and face-to-face hours. The role of teachers, students and parents in making decisions about curriculum and assessment at the school level will thus be massively restricted in the 1990s.

The government's intention is that the occupational culture of teachers will return to one of being servant to the public in its worst sense, to function like a checkout operator for supermarket-style education which shelves 'No Name' products according to (highly erratic) market forces. This process of de-skilling and de-professionalisation was visible in 1989 with the marketing of a third rate classroom management/discipline booklet titled 'Assertive Discipline' to people who had struggled for years to develop effective discipline solutions tailored to their own clientele. The insulting message was that international commercial products provide instant remedies which, by implication, NSW teachers had failed to produce. Michael Apple has documented a similar process for curricular and syllabus materials in the USA.

The White Paper acknowledges that an important part of professional development can be served by school-based curriculum development but claims that the proposals in the report respond to dissatisfaction — particularly expressed in primary schools — with demands placed on a teacher's time by the process of school-based curriculum reform. It is hard to argue this point. Even in the context of endorsed exemplary school level curriculum development, as portrayed in the Carpenter study, the level of teacher resistance was high with the majority apathetic or actively opposed to what an effective minority was achieving. The White Paper confidently cites the attitude of teachers to school-level curriculum development as an 'unwanted burden'. However, the 'burden' might be more 'wanted' if the conditions surrounding it change. Thus it is the interpretation of the problem and assumptions about possible solutions which need to be actively opposed.

### Teachers can develop curriculum

While there is no doubt that most teachers do lack time during school hours to effectively manage curriculum development, history shows that many NSW teachers were willing to sacrifice their own time in order to gain control over what they did in their classrooms — witness 10 705 OAS courses for Years 11 and 12 and 3118 school courses for Years 9 and 10 (p 22). Yet these figures understate the school-based movement as they only record 'approved'

courses; many schools ran alternative curricula in the junior school as interest electives without needing to seek departmental approval and accreditation. Ironically, these less rigorous courses will still have some room to operate under the new formula.

The present government's own 'Staying On' program — which has recently been expanded because it was so successful — demonstrates one way of resolving the acknowledged teacher disquiet over curriculum development encroaching on other responsibilities within the school. The 'Staying On' project derived from a parliamentary review on the lack of educational opportunities in Sydney's western suburbs. One of the few education programs to survive the change of government in 1987, 'Staying On' incorporates six periods release for a curriculum development co-ordinator in each cluster school. It also provides a sum of money which the school can use, at its own discretion, to support curriculum development, for example. This program demonstrates a solution which does not take control away from the school site, a strategy commensurate with those high in the Scott Report priorities for systemic reorganisation, though low in the government's priorities for implementation.

The argument can also be put forward that teachers do not necessarily lack the expertise to conduct effective school-based curriculum development. Student approval for OAS courses must have been high for the courses to proliferate so rapidly, therefore teacher competence in curriculum design must have been publicly demonstrated. Did not the department acknowledge this in the first place by approving, through a tortuous process, 13 823 courses? The Carpenter study suggests that behind student approval was strong parent and community approval, particularly for those OAS courses which were vocational in nature and led students neatly into different and more satisfying careers without having to compete in the academic curriculum. Most OAS courses were not Mickey Mouse at all.

Further, all teacher education courses in NSW of which I am aware, stress the importance of training teachers to be effective in designing and developing curriculum. At Newcastle University, for example, we offer student teachers a unified account of educational studies so that they might reflect critically about the social, political, theoretical and practical aspects of their occupation. We also provide the skills and opportunities for student teachers to learn to research their own practices so that they will be able to make coherent decisions about the different problem/solution frameworks within which each will work. Even if one does

find a deficiency in this area within schools might not some local inservice work quickly and more efficiently amend it?

The reason the White Paper ignores such obvious solutions can be found in the government's determination to take control of the curriculum and re-centralise it within the restructured (but none-the-less equally monolithic) bureaucratic enterprises. The White Paper does acknowledge that Board determined courses should not be so prescriptive as to preclude local input by teachers, but they can safely say this knowing that the real decisions will be made at higher levels. The intention to create courses through the new Board of Studies for every possible eventuality renders hollow the promise (Proposals 10 – 11) to allow separate school courses where there are particular needs not otherwise met by the Board.

### The battle for curriculum control not over?

One would be forgiven for thinking that the battle over curriculum in NSW has been fought and lost. For those keen on a last skirmish there is little support. The Teachers' Federation has never viewed school-based curricula with affection and has publicly re-stated this position in accepting the general thrust of the White Paper and its move towards a core curriculum. Perhaps there's another battle to be won.

Stronger school-level curricular control might come with increased school-level economic control. Without ignoring all the traps and encumbrances global budgeting embodies, perhaps we should acknowledge that the action is usually where the money's at. If a school's curriculum is once again to serve economic interests, then having control of a school's financial resources might be the best way to ensure some local say about the shape curriculum takes on. At a number of schools I am currently researching in the Hunter Region, school-level courses are actually being introduced for the first time or being expanded through links to industry, colleges of technical and further education and in response to community pressures for subjects not currently available. Control over the curriculum is the same issue, but in the 1990s we'll fight it out on a different arena.

### References

1. NSW. Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs (1989), *Excellence and equity: New South Wales curriculum reform* Rydalmere, Sydney Allen.
2. See 'Pragmatic Curriculum Development' in the May 1990 issue of *Curriculum Perspectives* for a full account of this research.