

EDUCATION - FOR WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY?

A Submission by the NZ Catholic Bishops on the Draft Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006)

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft curriculum (hereafter DC) as we would welcome any opportunity to contribute to the betterment of education in our country. We thank the Ministry of Education for conducting this consultation.

Although we have a particular interest in the education provided by Catholic schools, we see ourselves as partners with all schools and tertiary institutions in a common commitment to our nation's children and our nation's future.

Background to our observations

Catholic education is rooted explicitly in the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is recognised, and even required by, the Integration Agreement of each Catholic school. On this basis, we try to form people who can contribute to making society more just and more compassionate: in the phrase of Pope John Paul II, "making human life more human". We understand all education in these terms, not just Catholic education.

Such an education obviously includes teaching the knowledge, understanding and skills needed for successful living – socially and economically. We aim at doing this with excellence. But education also includes teaching the skills needed for critiquing social and economic patterns that compromise justice or neglect compassion. Without teaching these skills, schools would merely reproduce, and extend, existing social and economic mores.

An International Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1971 put it this way:

The method of education very frequently still in use today encourages narrow individualism. Part of the human family lives immersed in a mentality which exalts possessions. The school and the communications media are often at the service of the established order and allow only the kind of formation desired by that order; that is to say, not new persons but only copies of what people are already like.

But education demands a renewal of heart, a renewal based on the recognition of sin both in individuals and in society. It will also inculcate a truly and entirely human way of life, including justice, love and simplicity. It will likewise awaken a critical sense, which will lead us to reflect on the society in which we live and on its values; it will make people ready to renounce those values when they cease to promote justice for everyone. (*Justice in the World*, paras. 50, 51)

It is on these grounds that we detect potential for conflict between the DC and the true needs of education. The DC is not explicit enough about the aim of turning out citizens who not only respect current values but are able to examine them critically. The school exists to facilitate both cultural *transmission* and cultural *renewal*.

Specific Observations

In its *Vision Statement* (page 8) the DC includes making our young people "entrepreneurial". It is one thing to lead them to be motivated, reliable, enterprising, resilient and enthusiastic – in all areas of life, including sport, leisure, work and home life. But the term entrepreneurial has other connotations which deserve closer scrutiny. According to the concise Oxford Dictionary, an entrepreneur is "one who undertakes or controls a business or enterprise and bears the risks of profits and losses". This "competency" has its home in the world of business. Business has its rightful place. But it is also a sectional interest. On the other hand, the business of education has the wider purpose of serving the "common good". This is much broader than any merely sectional interest, and requires much more than merely learning to compete – entrepreneurially – within the existing social and economic order.

The curriculum cannot be isolated from the environment in which students live. This is an environment that allows aggressive and greedy market practices, including some that target adolescents, and now even children, bypassing parental oversight. A successful education, by any definition, includes providing students with the skills they need not to be taken advantage of – not just providing the competence they need to go and do the same to others under the title of being entrepreneurial.

It was concern about this narrowing down of education that prompted Cardinal Thomas Williams to say, on our behalf, in a letter for Catholic Education Day, 2000:

At a time when education is no longer seen as a process which enriches the lives of individuals and society but rather as a means of turning out ‘products’ to meet the market needs of the day, our Catholic schools are doing all possible to withstand the thrust towards consumerism and utilitarianism.

The problem will be compounded if schools lose their independence to teach the skills of critiquing business practices whenever those practices are not conducive to creating a just and compassionate society. The risk of losing this independence is the reason why we have strong reservations about special partnerships between business enterprises and schools. The fact that this can happen is part of the environment in which the curriculum will be used.

While the activities of entrepreneurs are important to society, no less important are the activities of those who practice professions and trades, and work in service industries, indeed all those who are collectively termed workers. It is quite impossible to imagine a society of only entrepreneurs; all societies depend on large numbers of workers, all of whom have their own dignity.

A major function of schools, especially in a democratic society, is to produce critical thinkers, discerning consumers, and perceptive citizens. Schools should be helping young people to understand how they are manipulated by advertisers, marketers, and ideologues of various kinds. If they are to invite business into the school, they should not give a privileged place to the views of employers. Equal time should be given to the perspectives of employees, the unions, the unemployed and the consumers.

The centrality of economic interests and the lack of the critical dimension distorts the treatment of the various learning areas. In the *Social Sciences* section, for example, it is stated that students must “understand their place in the economic world” (page 22). There is no acknowledgement that they should be able critically to examine, (even reject) their “place”.

In the *Health and Physical Education* section, there is no opportunity to investigate those organisations which endanger the health of workers, consumers and the general public. The role of drug, tobacco and alcohol firms comes readily to mind but many other industries damage the health of their workers and members of the community. Government and local body policies also damage health. It is widely recognised that poverty and poor housing are major causes of ill-health and that people differ in their ability to gain access to good health care. Health programmes in schools should seriously examine these issues.

We gratefully acknowledge that science and technology have brought many blessings, but in the *Science and Technology* sections of the DC there is no acknowledgement that the benefit of these advances has not been spread equitably, often with an adverse effect on the world’s most vulnerable populations. And although “care of the environment” is also a value in the DC there is no recognition of the fact that social policies and business and individual activities have brought about degradation of the environment. As we wrote earlier this year

Protecting the environment involves moderating our desires to consume and own more, which create life-styles that bring death to millions of other people. Consumerism, global environmental change and suffering in the developing world are inextricably linked (*Renew the Face of the Earth: Environment Justice*, Caritas-Aotearoa NZ, 2006, p. 3).

The *Science* section acknowledges that the scientific perspective must be “informed by social and ethical principles” (p.20). But this is not followed up, and the absence of any reference to current ethical debates, for example about stem-cell research and genetic modification, could leave students with the impression that science is unproblematic, non-political, and ultimately autonomous; that it is a legitimate means to any end that is itself desirable.

Here, too, the curriculum needs to acknowledge the cultural environment in which the students live. In this environment it is uncritically assumed that a useful end is sufficient of itself to legitimate the means for achieving it. Education would be defective if our children could leave school not knowing any better.

Although the *English* curriculum speaks of students who are “able to think deeply and critically” (p.15), no direction is given as to how this can be done. A major objective of English teaching is to help young people to detect the many ways in which language is used to encourage people to think and act in particular ways.

Conclusion

As we said, together with the Anglican bishops in 1992:

It is within a community of people that education takes place, and the nature of this education is inevitably influenced by the kind of community in which it is carried on.

It is not surprising therefore that, because New Zealanders thought of their country as a classless society, there was a stress on equality and justice as important education aims. Nor is it surprising that as more recent governments have tried to steer the nation towards competitiveness and economic growth, they have demanded that the schools devote more attention to fostering individualism and marketable skills.

We would not dispute the fact that education must help to prepare young people for their work, but we deplore the tendency for education to be viewed as merely an instrument in the service of industry. Education is pre-eminently a personal good which enriches the possessor, while also being a social good which brings advantages to the whole society.

Although humans can only develop in a society, they are not mere functionaries of that society but are individual persons. Education is essentially about the development of whole persons: intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically, morally and spiritually. To neglect any aspect of persons is to deprive them of an adequate education.

... Because of this, we believe that the school curriculum should give adequate attention to all aspects of personhood in order to assist students to become full and integrated personalities, critical citizens, and sound thinkers. *The Purpose of Education: a Christian Perspective*, 1992, reproduced in *Church in the World: Statements on Social Issues 1979-1997 by NZ Catholic Bishops*, Chris Orsman & Peter Zwart (eds), 1997, pp 20-21).

We have argued against a privileged place being given in education to the sectional interests of marketing and business. It was also to prevent sectarianism that NZ rightly adopted its policy of “secular education”. More recently, this legal provision has been misinterpreted to mean excluding the spiritual dimension of reality. To exclude the spiritual dimension is to remove

the ultimate safeguard against reducing persons to merely market values. It is the spiritual dimension which also gives sense and validity to the paradox of affirming both individual worth and social responsibility (ibid, p.22).

We respectfully submit that the DC needs to be revised to modify its bias towards making education subservient to the market culture.