

Australian education goes from bad to worse

by Don Veitch

Education in Australia is in a state of turmoil. Beginning in the early 1970s, attempts were made to carry out social engineering programs through the education system. Now, a new wave of outcome-based education (OBE) is developing with the push for a national curriculum.

In the early 1970s, educational experimenters seized control of the education system, but for all the millions of dollars spent and the dozens of top-level commissions and inquiries recommending reform, no worthwhile change has occurred. One major report, the Karmel report, which was the basis for a wave of educational experimentation during the government of Gough Whitlam (1972-75), quoted Mao Zedong as an educational model—"Let a hundred flowers bloom. Let a thousand schools of thought contend." Is it any wonder that it all has come to nought? In those days in the 1970s, small was beautiful, but now there are moves to get big and to centralize curriculum at the national level.

The last 20 years of experimentation and change for the sake of change in education have done nothing but destabilize and confuse teachers, students, and parents; in fact, the 20-year period has been a disaster. Into the vacuum and demoralization in education which is now developing has come the New Age educationalist, the deconstructed mind, and the politically correct curriculum. Lurking in the background are International Monetary Fund (IMF)-inspired austerity measures and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) types advocating "multiculturalism" and racial awareness.

Standards are falling

Standards of learning are falling. In one state, New South Wales, education authorities in 1990 introduced basic skills testing and found to their horror that more than 25% of Year Three students are unable to read at a level appropriate to that grade, and the majority of these students are still impaired when they go on to high school. In another study conducted at LaTrobe University in Victoria, it was found that 40% of science students fail basic tests of literacy, despite having passed senior level English. The Australian Council for Educational Research studies, a top-level think-tank funded by the federal government, has shown that only 52% of Year

Five students operated above the minimum level of competence. Other reports have identified high levels of adult illiteracy, some pointing to adult illiteracy in Australia as high as 20%, and the government's own Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC) has found that 25% of children who began secondary schooling could not read and write properly.

There has been a call for greater value for the education dollar from business circles such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In one state of Australia, Victoria, which is led by the conservative Liberal government of Prime Minister Jeff Kennett, the education budget has been cut by 5% in real terms, 7,000 teachers have been made redundant, dismissed, or not replaced, and some 200 schools closed. Other schools are to amalgamate.

The response of the current Labor government to the falling educational standards and parent concern has been to push for a national curriculum. The proposed national curriculum has eight key learning areas, including English, technology, health, physical education, mathematics, and science. Ministers of education from all six states of Australia have just met in the southern capital of Hobart to plan a national educational syllabus. This battle for a national syllabus has gone on for five years. Earlier attempts, in 1989, to introduce a "National Outcomes" study, foundered because of resistance. But the push has recommenced.

More generally, the push failed because of objections to the "lack of rigor" and the dubious content within the curriculum. For example, one group of four professors from the physics and mathematics department at the University of Adelaide claimed that the proposed national curriculum was a smorgasbord of "politically correct" axioms and had little to do with education.

The Business Council of Australia, a rat's nest of oligarchs, through its offshoot, the National Industry Education Forum, is pushing hard for the national outcome-based curriculum. The forum believes that young people should come out of the education system with skills useful in commerce and industry. EPAC recommends more vocational education to ensure the education system trains workers more effectively. The goal of education, EPAC believes, is to make Australia "internationally competitive."

No disagreement from the states

As of mid-December 1993, the federal Labor government has been forced to backpedal on its plans for a national schools curriculum because of political gamesmanship from the Liberal-National parties which dominate state parliaments. Under the constitutional arrangements, the states have responsibility for education, but it is the Commonwealth which has the financial clout. The state governments are really only fighting for "states' rights," and in no way appear to dissent from the New Age education. The conservative parties' major dissent would be over support for capital punishment. The states and the federal government have agreed

to cooperate with the federal government through a body known as the Curriculum Corporation.

The syllabus is also under attack with New Age principles being inculcated at the earliest stage of education, the pre-school level.

A storm of controversy has arisen over a manual, *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Handbook*, released by the minister for family services. The manual sets out principles to be adhered to in pre-school kindergartens and are mandatory before funding will be granted. The minister has been accused of experimenting with the nation's children. The 52 regulations are a catalogue of politically correct outcomes and prescriptions designed to develop a New Age person. Included in the directives to child-care workers are: banning either the singing or playing of traditional Christmas carols in child-care centers because they are "culturally irrelevant." Principle 21 from the guidelines condemns the "constant repetitions of Christmas songs as background at the end of the year," and claims that these are "culturally irrelevant"; deprives boys from playing with toy trucks, trains, and bulldozers on the grounds this promotes sexist stereotypical behavior; requires centers to learn multiculturalism, to build a sense of cultural variety; and stops the use of stencils and coloring books, because these encourage "uniformity." "Staff should support pretend play by providing appropriate materials and these should reflect the multicultural nature of Australian society. The Family Services minister is responsible for the disbursement of \$460 million in annual funding for fee relief and those in the child-care network who do not follow prescriptions in the guidelines, risk losing funding," it reads.

According to Julian McGauran, a National Party senator for Victoria, this is an "appalling effort to politicize the nation's pre-school child-care environment." The vice president of the Child Care Association has claimed the regulations are "the most insidious form of blackmail"; that the handbook is "not satisfied with children being encouraged to explore and respect other cultures. It virtually makes it compulsory for children to believe in the federal government's political policy of multiculturalism."

Market solutions for education

The New Right "Thatcherites" who largely control the political and economic agenda of the public service, the Liberal Party, and the Labor government, have attempted to up the propaganda effort in recent times. The free-trade, market solutions which spell the end of a sensible, properly funded state school system are being peddled even more vigorously. Dr. Myron Lieberman, a "leading American educational consultant" who recently arrived in Australia, spoke to a group called the Australian Adam Smith Club in Melbourne. The Adam Smith club is chock full of elements who are pro-English establishment, primarily located in the large mining companies such as Western Mining Corp.,

Ltd. Lieberman claimed that "market systems here generally have done more than political systems to equalize the human condition," and that this "equality" could be enhanced even further by "liberating" poorer students from school and allowing them to work earlier. According to this quack idea, "early entry into the labor market would be a major step to equalizing the life-time earnings of those who do not benefit from extended formal education."

And the Anti-Defamation League in Australia has been busy for some time. In 1985, a teaching kit about the Holocaust was designed by the B'nai B'rith and released to secondary schools in New South Wales. In 1987, the New South Wales Anti-Defamation Commission of B'nai B'rith received a \$25,000 government grant to publish *The Prejudice Book*, a book based on the "race awareness" campaigns of the ADL in the United States. After the success of this propaganda effort, in March 1988, the Israeli consulate introduced "educational" kits into 470 high schools in New South Wales. In a more recent development in Victoria, an inquiry into race hate recommended that all schools have race awareness committees to monitor "race" issues.

All this is a long way from what is really needed, that is, a new educational approach based on the education principles of Lyndon LaRouche, where students learn to think by replicating the great scientific and technological discoveries down through history.

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