

# EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM: A CHANGING OF THE GUARDS?

## A response to 'Focusing on Learning' by Professor Ken Eltis, Ministerial Committee of Review [NSW] Report

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### Bureaucracy and resilience to change

As teachers met at the NSW Board of Studies in North Sydney recently, to analyse and discuss the Eltis Report *Focusing on Learning*, they may well have been conscious of the phenomenon Weber once described: the resilience of bureaucracy to the rapid turnover of Ministers in comparison to the relatively permanent career of those working in and heading each department. I had cause to phone Simon Crean's office this year with an enquiry about John Dawkins' period of tenure at DEET. The person answering my call had to be reassured that Dawkins indeed had been their Minister all of four years ago! As one of the most public reformist federal Ministers ever, this is a sad fate, and a salutary lesson for those with less deserved political egos.

What Weber did not realise, although I am sure most teachers do, is the even stronger resilience of the next tier down to the desires and directives of their employers. The contested three-way relationship between teachers, state and national bureaucrats, and Ministries of Education has been definitively portrayed in the recently released Report of the Eltis Committee, *Focusing on Learning*. This Report is the published findings of the NSW Ministerial Review of the use of outcomes and profiles as a curricular strategy in education, set up immediately after the election of the ALP Carr Government in NSW last April. On the national level, the Eltis Report presents the first researched analysis of the practice and impact of the National Statements and Profiles curriculum phenomena, which spread down the rivers of the Australian educational landscape like blue algae on a hot day, early in the 1990s.

### Reflections of views from classrooms

The Eltis Report is a brave document. I believe that it presents the first real

view about curriculum from the classroom since the Wyndham Report of the early sixties, itself the first major review of NSW schools for 50 years. The Eltis team visited a broad range of schools and held five public meetings, in addition to carefully working through nearly 600 submissions. Brian Scott undertook much the same process for his influential

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reports on the management of NSW schools in 1989 and 1990 but the Eltis Report much more faithfully recounts teachers' stories and presents them in a much more modest cover (acknowledging teachers' hatred of 'glossies'?).

The Eltis method appears to have been one of sitting back and letting the findings emerge from the data rather than starting off the process with a wish list and spending the rest of the time unproductively fighting over what can stay or go. Eltis uses the stories of teachers, parents and others to construct the plan of action, a short sharp list of realistic, manageable and educationally sound recommendations. The lack of dissent over this report is remarkable in recent educational history and reflects the consensus Eltis built up during the Review. A direct consequence was the high level of acceptance upon release which should ensure a higher than normal level of implementation for its recommendations.

### The central theme

What did *Focusing on Learning* report? Unfortunately, the important findings were submerged on the release day through Premier Carr's desire to grab media attention over the Report's minor recommendation to scrap the terminology of functional grammar in favour of traditional terms (noun, verb, preposition

etc.). This is one fourth part of one of 21 recommendations. Undue emphasis on the grammar issue completely distorts the reason for and achievement of the Eltis Committee's work. As Eltis wrote to the Minister on presenting the Report, 'If the Review has a central theme, it is that schooling depends more than ever on the quality and professionalism of teachers, and that this needs to be incorporated in strategic planning for major directions in education policy'. The quite radical refocusing of decision-making in education at the professional and school level is borne out repeatedly in the recommendations. The tone of the report is reflected in statements such as 'thorough consultation with teachers and schools' [R8], 'according to the best judgment of teachers' [R11], 'schools and their communities be responsible for devising their own procedures' [R13], 'schools be the focus for delivering professional development' [R16], and 'schools to gain direct access to funding to support local initiatives' [R 21].

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It is this factor, more than any other, which sets the Eltis Report apart from the corporate federalism that has dominated public policy development under the Hawke/Keating agenda. It is ironic that the ALP has so warmly embraced neo-liberalist strategies and conservative values, not only in education. The loss of a progressive program in schools across Australia, regardless of the political party in power at state/territory level, has infuriated many educationists; as has the Australian Education Union's uncritical support for this paradigm shift that sees education almost only as a national commodity.

### NSW schools and the National Statements and Profiles

The Eltis findings directly challenge the rationale and worth of NSW schools uncritically incorporating nationally-

consistent learning outcomes and assessment profiles of students' ability, not only because the ones produced by the Curriculum Corporation are reported by teachers as vague and jargonistic but also because they set up the impression that schools can present precise standards and that these standards can be used to monitor schools across Australia, regardless of the local context — the racial, poverty, gender, rural isolation, inner urban and recent arrival pluralities of contemporary society.

Notions of equity and 'a fair go' are themes conspicuous by their absence from education policy in Australia for the last decade. As the Report states in Recommendation 4, priority should now be given 'to developing syllabus outcomes and support materials that meet the needs of the full range of students, including those who need additional support to complete their schooling successfully'.

### Outcomes-based education and Eltis

NSW syllabus documents will therefore be outcomes-based but, in a commendable effort to sort out the terminology, the Eltis report recommends these be transformative rather than traditional or transitional outcomes which are hierarchical, instrumental, utilitarian and ignore the complexity of schools. The Report quotes Professor Michael Apple from the University of Wisconsin-Madison as arguing that outcomes-based education 'is a simplistic solution to very complicated problems'.

The Report also reviews the research literature on outcomes concluding that there is great exuberance without necessarily providing substantive evidence. Very few of a sample of 300 articles (from a field of 3,000) 'demonstrate substantive support for their [outcomes] use beyond general statements about improved test performance or better attitudes to learning by students, and about increased accountability'. Indeed, the Eltis Report states that 'much of the research [on outcomes] is not research at all, but a continuing dialogue based on beliefs, judgments and experiences'.

### Curriculum responsibility

The Eltis Report takes future NSW syllabus production back to the much more palatable intent of the NSW Education Reform Act of 1990. Recommendations One and Two state 'The Minister affirms the prime role of NSW syllabuses in describing the curriculum content' and

this will 'replace the current use of such [national] terms as profiles and levels'. Thus, 'the Board of Studies no longer be required to incorporate the National Profiles directly into NSW syllabuses'. The Report sets out a time-line for rewriting the latter, beginning with English and Maths K-6 with 'a limited number of outcomes statements' as modelled in the 1992 Years 7-10 Geography syllabus. What is important to note is that there is a new emphasis on input as well as output, providing much more scope for the internationally-recognised creativity of teachers in Australia's schools.

The combination of (a) teachers' professional knowledge, school-based experience and local community perspectives with (b) degrees of responsibility at various system levels in the Ministry, Department and Board of Studies characterises a new, more interactive, spiral process for curriculum development. This model sees schools

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as able to contribute meaningfully to curriculum decision-making within a tolerant and flexible framework decided upon at higher levels on the basis of state-wide priorities and the obligations and duties of government. This is what I am happy to call 'pragmatic curriculum development' where knowledge grows from experience not imposed as abstract theories by distant policy machines. But this is not a return to the free-for-all of the 1970s.

### What next?

What will teachers have to do now the Eltis Report is out? More than many think following the lack of controversy at its release, but not more than they and their schools can cope with. A few commentators, through Letters to the Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, suggested that school students were yet again at the mercy of political whim. This is a serious misreading of the purpose and intended practice of the Eltis Report. Teachers will have to work on curriculum at the school-level, they will need to reflect on what their students know and can learn when planning each day. The key words in the Eltis Report are 'knowledge, skills and understandings'. And schools once again have responsibility for devising their own assessment and reporting procedures. But the real work will have to be done at the Board of Studies as they rework syllabus

documents into five stages concentrating on content and generate and trial appropriate support documents. These procedures represent sensible profession concerns, not political whims. Other states will be brave indeed if they do not look closely at *Focusing on Learning*. As the title suggests, this report more than any other in recent times takes seriously the advice of those working in schools rather than representing the latest fad circulating through state and national bureaucratic oases. The silence of the classroom in education policy has been broken. This is a welcome development in itself. If schools in other states can achieve the same respect then a changing of the guards will surely have begun.

## PUBLICATIONS

### *Gender, Science and Mathematics: Shortening the Shadow*

(Edited by Lesley H Parker, Léonie J Rennie and Barry J Fraser)

This book explores the relationship between gender, science and mathematics, and the gap between policy and practice. Its theme is that change agents, such as teachers and curriculum writers, have a key role in the translation of gender equity policy into gender equitable practices in science and mathematics education. Its 16 chapters, contributed by researchers from seven different countries, are arranged in three sections. The book is designed to be used throughout the world in a variety of university and college courses and by policy-makers concerned with activities which interface with the gender/science/mathematics relationship. It provides examples which illustrate vividly the rich field from which practitioners and policy-makers in this area now can draw.

This book was published in 1996 in hardbound (ISBN 0 7923 3533 X) and paperback (ISBN 0 7923 3582 1) versions. The cost of the paperback version is US\$45. The book can be obtained from Kluwer Academic Publishers, PO Box 322, 3300 AH, Dordrecht, The Netherlands (fax 31 7852-4474).