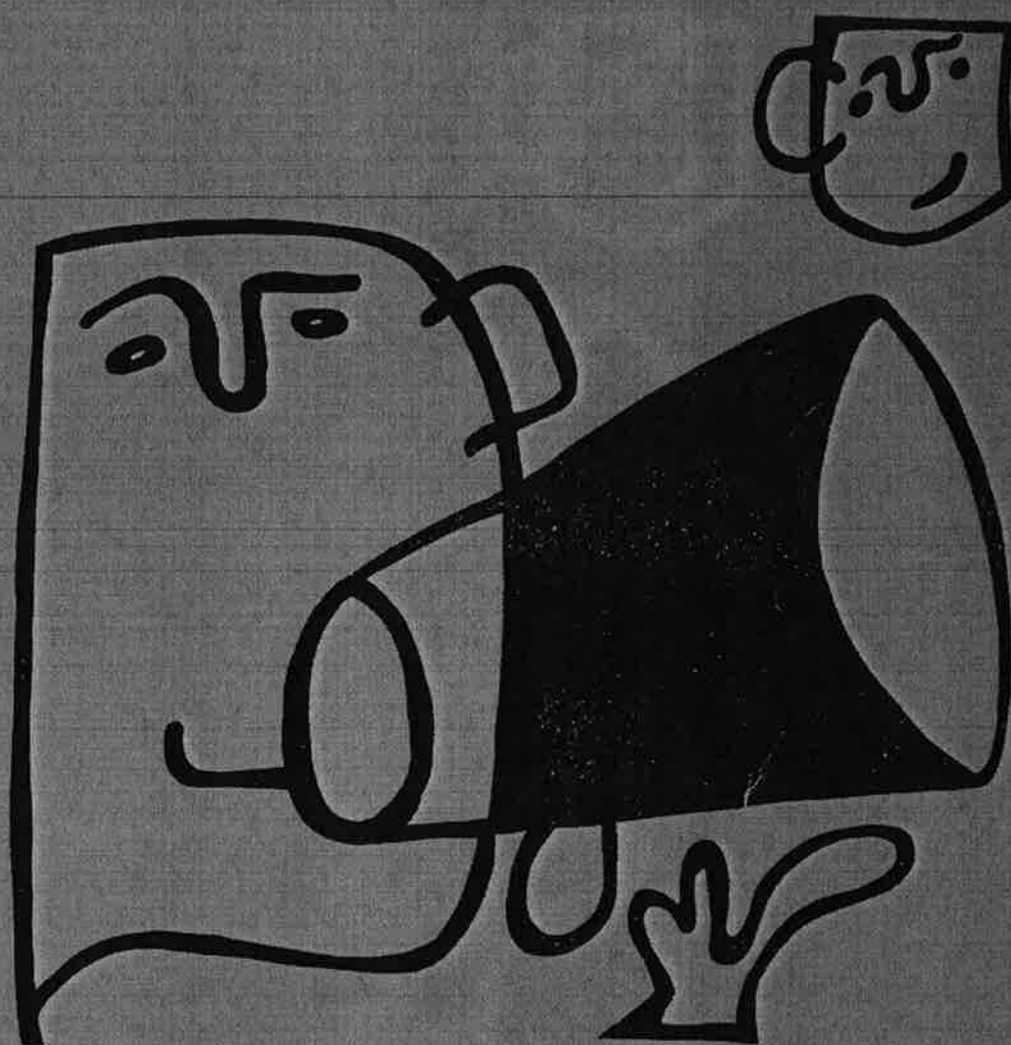


Education

Links

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Contents

- 4 Editorial: Education and social action
- 5 What's missing? Popular education and new discourses
RICK FLOWERS
- SOCIAL ACTION LEARNING & WORK**
- 7 Why can't TAFE appreciate us? Resisting cuts in education: one story
DEREK WADDELL
- 10 Resisting cuts in education: using both industrial and political strategies
KEIKO YASUKAWA
- 12 Politicising learning in the workplace: context and method
GRIFF FOLEY
- 17 Analysing workers' history through a 'learning lens'
LINDA COOPER
- TEACHERS WORK, STUDENTS LIVES & ACCESS**
- 21 The politics of education 'reform'
RICHARD WALSHAM
- 23 A facade for union bashing? The Ramsey Report on teacher education in NSW
KELVIN MCQUEEN
- 25 'Listen to me I'm leaving'
ROBERT HATTAM AND JOHN SMYTH
- 28 Scales of injustice: working with young people
DEBRA HAYES
- 31 Collaborating for social justice?
LYN TETT
- 35 Knowledge creation: a challenge for Higher Education in Ireland
ANNE RYAN AND ANN O'BRIEN
- CULTURAL ACTION**
- 41 From Freire to Boal
HERNAN FLORES
- 43 Risk and play: Group Devised Theatre creation
PAUL MURRAY
- 48 Theatre — art or action?
BRIDGET MARY AITCHISON
- 51 The Anti-Racism Radio Show
BEN ZION WEISS
- 56 Kids locked up
PETER SLATTERY
- 61 Viewpoint: Behind the rhetoric
ROWAN CAHILL
- 63 Loose Links
- 63 Contributors



The Director General of Education in NSW projects himself as modern and progressive and his critics as reactionary dinosaurs. **ROWAN CAHILL** peels back the rhetoric to discover a much more conservative agenda behind the bland managerial language.

Behind the rhetoric

A favourite theme of Dr. Ken Boston, Director-General of Education and Training (DET) in NSW, is that an unspecified, apparently large, proportion of state school teachers, like the public schools they work in, are educationally conservative. He expressed this view recently in a major speech in June 1998 and again during the industrial struggle for a new Teaching Award a year or so later. They are responsible for much that is wrong with secondary schooling: 'low retention rates, poor or mediocre Higher School Certificate performances and low enrolments'. According to Boston, the enemy and the systemic weaknesses are located in the comprehensive approach to schooling.

The gist of the argument is that there are a lot of teacher dinosaurs in the system opposing Boston's modern model of a decentralised, flexible education system, responsive to local needs, capable of delivering education in the 21st century. Arguably, the '\$50000 with strings' retrenchment offer to public school teachers in 2000 was an attempt to get rid of some of these beasts.

Boston's conservatism.

Boston's ideological rhetoric, with its clever assumption that he is the educational progressive and not the conservative, appeals to media-types hungry for take-away copy, talk-back fascists, and many people in between. But it does not portray what is actually happening in education, and what is largely responsible for the lowering of teacher morale. What it does do is convey aspects of Boston's ideological mindset.

The Director-General's rhetoric masks a determined conservative, Rightist, push to politically and ideologically centralise the education

system, and in the process, wring from it teacher initiative, imagination, and enterprise. He understands an important political lesson of 20th century history: geographically and rhetorically you can play all the devolution games you want, but if you control the ideology and the ideas that go into the system, you hold the centre and control the lot.

In the real education world of Boston's NSW, the important centralising agents are increasingly prescriptive curriculums and outcomes based education (with outcomes set down in great detail), superintended by state-wide testing. Taken together, these specify systemic targets, and the assiduous monitoring of achievement.

The experience of testing in NSW reflects the experience of similar testing in the USA and Great Britain. Rather than leading to any celebration of teacher talent and effort, testing feeds into the hands of politicians and educrats: it nourishes the perception that teachers are actually lowering standards; it is an accomplice to the running down of the public education system; and it helps generate the siege mentality that characterises the under-resourced and over-extended teaching profession. The process was dramatically evident in the Mt. Druitt HSC Results Case a few years ago.

Acceptance of the notion that teaching can be measured in terms of student test performance, and invalid comparative judgements based upon these results, trivialises teacher professionalism, downgrades teaching generally, effectively delivering teachers into the hands of educrats who can then better control what teachers should, and should not, do. Sadly it is a notion many teachers seem to have unquestioningly embraced, turning the definition of professionalism over to Boston's

apparatchiks. Goodbye initiative and individuality; hello rule book and checklists.

Test driven dumbing down.

It is cautionary to look at testing in the USA, where state-wide tests are variously used to identify students 'in need', set pass/fail criteria as pre-conditions for progress through the system, compare schools, and allocate education resources. Alarming, in states like Texas where there is no collective bargaining, teacher promotion is dependent on student scores. With so much at stake, allegations of test tampering are emerging. It is a process arguably going haywire. For President George W Bush, however, test-driven education is the 'education miracle'.

With a few exceptions, nearly every state in the USA administers standardised tests. Operating on the absurd premise that all children learn at the same pace, these tests are extraordinarily specific. Research has shown that students taught specific tasks and then tested on these, perform better than students similarly tested but taught in an education context where teaching is directed generally towards the "facilitation of learning". Not surprisingly, therefore, American standardised testing encourages the teaching of tests, rote learning, and cramming. Curriculums are bent towards test-taking. One could argue that the emphasis on testing, whilst alleged to be in the pursuit of raising educational standards, is ironically part of a process of dumbing-down the populace.

Test items can be ludicrous. In Virginia, for example, nine year olds are asked 'to evaluate the social, political, and economic life in Virginia from the Reconstruction period to the 20th

century....and its impact on politics and government, the economy, demographics, and public opinion....and the economic and social transition from rural, agricultural society to a more urban, industrialised society'. In Massachusetts standardised testing examines the 10th grade student's understanding of 'the meaning, implications, and import of historical events while recognising the contingency and unpredictability of history' with items like this: "Which individual led independence movements in nineteenth century South America: (a) Simon Bolivar (b) Fidel Castro (c) Francisco Pizarro (d) Gustavus Adolphus?"

Helping drive the American mania for standardised testing are publishing companies, now diversifying from textbooks to tests and involved in test development. Publishers are currently working with twenty states, developing "criteria-referenced" state-specific tests. Dominated by McGraw-Hill, Harcourt Inc., and Houghton-Mifflin, the testing market in 1999 was worth an estimated \$218.7 million, growing at an average of 7% a year (more than twice the growth rate of the textbook market).

Profits like this drive politics, and politics drive education. In California in 1997 Governor Pete Wilson did a deal with Harcourt Inc. They imposed the Harcourt STAR (Standardised Testing and Reporting) test on school districts around the state, guaranteeing its use for 5 years at \$12 million per annum, and insisting the test be taken in English even by those who only speak Spanish. Harcourt's profits from its Education Group jumped by 58% in 1998; Californian schools are now rated from highest to lowest on the basis of STAR scores. In turn there are spin-offs to this sort of publisher/political/ education wheeling and dealing, with lucrative contracts in the sale of textbooks aligned with the testing process.

Teaching: the silent service.

Another component of Boston's centralisation process is professional development. Gone are professional development programs planned by teachers around the needs of their schools and students. Under Boston, professional development has been taken away from teaching professionals and given over to materials, developed and approved by DET, and departmental cadres promoting government political agendas. It is a process enhanced by the dramatic decline in funding for professional development and the issuing of strict government guidelines relating to the use of available funds by professional associations. Professional associations

are increasingly becoming the mouthpieces of government priorities and DET agendas, going silent on professional criticism of the theory and practice of their various subject areas, a role that could place them in positions contrary to the DET.

For those teachers who wish to engage with the wider education world, there are no incentives to undertake post-graduate work, while pauper funding places severe limits on undertaking professional development independent of that provided by the DET.

Teacher training is another element in Boston's centralising process. In many ways he is simply taking teacher training back to the future, to a time thirty years ago when the Department of Education superintended teacher training.

For a while teacher training broke free from Departmental control, and a wide variety of trained teachers entered the system with a wide range of techniques, styles, approaches, and philosophies, helping make schools diversified and interesting places to teach and be taught in.

Boston however is turning the clock back. Just as the DET took over the TAFE system and eliminated a source of education variety and difference, so too is it now subtly venturing into teacher training. Increasingly, independent tertiary institutions and faculties are training teachers to teach the NSW curriculum in the NSW system by using in-house DET developed materials as classroom instruction guides. In this 'narrowing process', Education faculty leaders make tertiary curriculum decisions in consultation with DET power brokers. The DET has in mind the sort of graduates it wants: silent servants dispensing received education packages, rather than reflective, critical practitioners capable of contributing to the directions of teaching and education.

Straightjacket language.

It is important to understand that the sort of education system Dr. Boston wants to head up is modelled on New Right derived education policies. Education is increasingly given over to market forces and consumerism, and teachers encouraged to refrain from thinking too deeply about the social and ideological functions of their work and of institutionalised education.

In a recent article, Scottish educationist Dr. Walter Humes examined the ways in which the language and ideas of modern educational management limit and contain education debate, creating

official accounts of education celebrating managerial success and organisational achievement while discouraging or discrediting dissenters and critics. Teachers are confined by management language to all but basic education functions.

Language is power, and teachers who do not internalise the educational parameters set by government and its education managers, are marginalised and pathologised; dissent is seen as 'straying beyond the boundaries of acceptable professional discourse'. By revealing the oppressive political functions of the language of education management, Humes hopes to provide teachers with some of the tools necessary to become part of a challenging, empowering, teacher counter-movement.

In modern management culture, teacher energies directed to ensuring the new systems, processes, procedures, and structures are put in place. The job of the teacher is to concentrate on operational matters, not to ask first order 'Why?' questions. Dissenters are those teachers who find time amongst heavy work loads 'to reflect on (educational) aims and principles'; those who ask 'Why?' questions, as opposed to those who ask the sanctioned 'How?' questions.

Hume refers to extensive international literature commentating on this preferred role of teachers, and cites 1998 statements by the then Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales, Chris Woodhead, to the effect that teachers who value questioning, reflection, and critical thinking have no place in modern institutionalised education. Teachers internalise the vocabularies of organisation and professionalism defined by officialdom. A culture of niceness ensures that internal debates are characterised by courtesy and civility, devoid of emotion. Indeed emotion is the pathological enemy. The political result is the institutional silencing of critics.

According to Humes, contemporary education management is all about presentation. Reality is a malleable commodity that can be packaged and marketed. Orwellian Newspeak dominates. 'Guidelines' are mandatory; 'empowerment' means taking on extra responsibilities without extra power; 'ownership' means the roll-over acquiescence to directives; 'consultation' is a process of management rather than one of finding out and insight.

'In all of this', writes Humes, 'the notion that education has something to do with knowledge, truth and understanding becomes a naive anachronism'. ■