Education Links 61/62

popular education & social action

the radical education dossier

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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 $50,000 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 curricula 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 educators: 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 apparchiks. 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 preconditions for progress through the system, compare schools, and allocate education resources. Alarmingly, 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
are increasingly becoming the 
mouthpieces of government priorities 
and DET agendas, giving 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 
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 
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 
student 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 
the 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 commenting 
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’.

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