Chapter 6

Curriculum, class and culture

Questions From A Worker Who Reads
…The young Alexander conquered India.
Did he go alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Didn't he even have a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada sank.
Was he the only one to cry?
(Bertold Brecht)

The literature on school improvement, for all its talk of vision, mission and values, is strangely silent about curriculum. It tacitly accepts the legitimacy and benefit of a curriculum imposed from above. The collegiality it invites does not, apparently, extend to jointly discussing what should be taught and why. In the English context in particular, it is as if school culture and the capacity for change are unimpeded by an imposed National Curriculum which was designed with barely a thought for learner motivation.

There are some major problems with an imposed curriculum.

i) The imposition of a curriculum assumes a linear view of reality. The curriculum is seen as the starting point: first the curriculum, then work out how to 'deliver' it, and finally measure how much has been learnt. This model, formalised by Tyler (1949), appeals to common sense and bureaucratic minds, but is really far too simple.

The Curriculum is never finally defined on paper. The way we teach can radically affect the curriculum as experienced by our students. The way it is tested washes back on both.

ii) It quickly acquires a false sense of permanence. People begin to assume that the curriculum has always looked like this. The National Curriculum (England and Wales) was a complete upstart, a strange

> Curriculum is reshaped, remade, reborn, recoded in what we do with kids in classrooms. Pedagogy re-mediates, frames and rearticulates what will count as knowledge in classrooms. So no matter how we theorise or 'fix' the curriculum – either centrally or locally – it won't make much difference if our pedagogy isn't up to scratch.
>
> Basil Bernstein has long held that assessment and evaluation will ultimately pull curriculum and pedagogy along. Thirty years of research on teacher behaviour tells us that as soon as we bring in 'high stakes' assessment … teachers will suss out what is being assessed and torque or reorient the curriculum and pedagogy back towards the 'high stakes'. (Allan Luke, 1999)

mixture of advanced thinking, political arrogance and ideological censorship, but within three or four years it began to look natural, just part of the way schools do things.

iii) We forget that a curriculum is but a selection from that vast array of knowledge, skills and emotions that may be worth passing down to the next generation. It assumes that those who designed it know what our students will need. It assumes that those who have selected this curriculum have made a neutral decision, and have our best interests at heart.

iv) It creates a false sense of insecurity: teachers and pupils become so concerned with covering the syllabus that they fail to construct from it *their* curriculum, their set of meanings, their understanding of the world which may act as a guide in a future yet unknown.

Improvement has to be rooted in the identification of educational aims. Improvement is a moral category, not just a technical pursuit. If improvement simply involved delivering whatever curriculum is imposed, then an efficiently taught racist or fundamentalist curriculum would do just as well.

'Curriculum is a selection from the culture'

Raymond Williams' concept of a *selective tradition* (1961) is crucial to a critical understanding of curriculum. Williams was personally engaged in transforming the teaching of English literature and culture at Cambridge into a subject that was able to stir some of the brightest students of the generation. Having grown up in a railway worker's family on the Welsh border, he struggled to understand the fixed canon of an hereditary elite culture. He successfully linked the study of literary texts to their political environment, shedding new light on Dickens and Gaskell and Hardy, reconnecting novels to contemporary political texts and the wider

culture, and denying the assumption that what we call Literature is radically separate and on a higher plane than politics.

Williams sought to understand the processes of selection, and the forces that shape it, in order to disrupt the fixity of that particular canon of texts known as English Literature. This raises the issue of social power and the impact of a class structure on culture. We should question the influence, albeit complex and refracted, of an elite's

> vision of legitimate knowledge, one that in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchises another's. (Apple 1993:49)

The concept of selection is crucial. With his formulation 'Curriculum is a selection from the culture', Denis Lawton (1978) attempted to transfer Williams' insight to the school situation. This was liberating to a point, since curriculum no longer appeared normal or natural, but Lawton risked losing Williams' critical edge. His statement begs some questions:

i)   the definite article suggests a singular entity, whether an authoritative canon or a broadly accepted common culture

ii)   it is important to ask why particular items are selected, who has done the selecting, for whom and to what ends.

Since then, many attempts have been made to analyse the selected curriculum in terms of social and ideological direction. My preferred model comes from Stephen Kemmis and colleagues (Victoria, Australia). The state government had commissioned a team to consider a vocational alternative to the traditional academic curriculum, but their response was broader and more critical:

> Educational principles are social principles. Our views of education, and hence of schooling, have their justification in views of society and the proper role of education for participation in the life and work of society.
>
> The problem is that people tend to construe differences between codes in education as differences of style. And that hides the fact that there are profound disagreements about what education is and what it is for. (Kemmis, Cole and Suggett 1983:8)

They developed a model based on three *orientations*, which I have attempted to model below.

i) **Neo-classical / vocational**. A *neo-classical* (academic) curriculum and a *vocational* curriculum share the same orientation. Both fit people into society as it stands, but for different roles: manual workers require clearly defined competences, whereas managerial and professional roles

Liberal –

progressive

virtue   individual

power   social

adaptive ——————▶ transformative

Neo-classical /   **Socially-**

Vocationalist   **critical**

require higher levels of general education and abstract universalised thinking.

Both are construed in terms of being realistic, with a belief that 'education merely reflects the principles of the wider society'. The world is 'hierarchically ordered ... and the best endowed will find their way to rewarding positions'. A certainty is assumed about what is worth knowing, based on 'time-honoured beliefs' but 'reinterpreted for the modern world'. (ibid)

 ii) **Liberal-progressive** This descriptor identifies some limiting features of progressivism, as found for example in progressive primary schools or versions of secondary English. It tends to be individualistic, disregarding social pressures and structures.

> Liberal humanism is a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters. It is stronger on adultery than on armaments, and its valuable concern with freedom, democracy and individual rights are simply not concrete enough.   (Terry Eagleton 1983:107)

It is less authoritarian and more open than a neo-classical or vocational curriculum, and creates valuable spaces for learning, but is not as radical as its advocates claim. It rejects the subordination of education to employers' requirements - though sometimes overstating the case, as if pupils wouldn't ever need to earn a living. Its preferred way to improve society is by promoting personal growth: developing 'a sense of the good, true and beautiful in every child'. Its weakness is that it is 'individualistic, moralistic, and apolitical'.

iii) **Socially-critical** The team then identify, and clearly favour, this third orientation. 'If changes are to be wrought in our social structure, then individual virtue and individual action will be insufficient to bring them about. They must be brought about by collective action capable of confronting unjust and irrational social structure.' We need to reach a 'critical and historical understanding of current culture', and to engage in a 'collective search for solutions'. Though sharing with vocationalists the demand for relevance and contextualised learning, this orientation is different; socially-critical educators try to weaken the boundaries between school and community in order to engage learners in community-based action and analysis, rather than simply to give them skills.

* * *

An understanding of curricular orientations is needed in order to evaluate the direction of educational change. Without it, we are unable to distinguish better from merely different, faster or worse. Improvement means different things to different people – a dilemma which we cannot escape simply by concentrating on culture, capacity or change management. What would count as improvement in a fascist dictatorship? in a Cistercian monastery? for a clan of new age travellers? An improvement for the rich man in his castle can make life harder for the poor man at the gate.

There can be no authentic discussion about improvement without a discussion about values and social position. The failure to engage in such a discussion simply confirms the status quo, or rather, the direction of change imposed by the most powerful.

For example, when evaluating the Literacy Hour in English primary schools, we need to look beyond test results to examine which literary practices are emphasised and what messages children receive? Is the academic / vocationalist goal of functional literacy being pursued at the expence of empathy and expression (the liberal-progressive emphasis) or critical literacy?

Education for Citizenship sounds quite a radical innovation, but might easily decline into a conservative Civics, involving factual knowledge about constitutional structures combined with a dose of patriotic duty. A liberal-progressive version might involve compassion for those less fortunate and some 'active citizenship' in the form of charitable acts. A socially-critical version requires a bolder selection of controversial issues, and a pedagogy combining knowledge, empathy and collective emancipatory action.

Curriculum, race and social class

Although it is common to challenge the imposed curriculum in terms of a multicultural or antiracist alternative, it has become almost impossible to debate a curriculum for pupils who are marginalised by their position in the class structure. The term Community Curriculum is rather too vague. Vocational alternatives prescribed for disaffected pupils increase motivation, but young people surely need something more than skills for employment.

Clarity on this matter is particularly important at the present time. The Thatcherite curriculum of 1988, despite the general neo-liberal politics of her government, was significantly neo-conservative in its insistence on a rigid curriculum for all children based on an authorised and traditional body of knowledge. (See Apple 1996 for the relationship between neo-conservativism and neo-liberalism.) New Labour has, in some respects, brought curriculum policy more into line with neo-liberal tendencies. The concept of a broad and balanced curriculum, albeit distorted by a conservative vision of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge, has been abandoned in favour of a curriculum where basic skills and vocational training displaces the humanities and creative arts for working-class children. We are in serious danger of a new form of educational apartheid.

It is no easy matter to rethink curriculum in relation to subordinate sections of a divided society, as we have seen in the intense debates surrounding education for a multiethnic society. Initial attempts at a multicultural curriculum which celebrated diversity were rightly condemned as superficial and exotic. More is at stake than increasing the representation of minorities through feasts and photographs, though this cannot be neglected. Our society is marked not only by diversity but by power differences manifested in prejudice, discrimination and institutional racism. Early attempts at an antiracist curriculum properly recognised this, but tended to blame all white people for these problems.

More recent developments in antiracist and multicultural curriculum provide a better response to the interplay of culture and social power, heritage and economics, identity and oppression. We are more aware now of the dynamic complexities of young people's lives, that they do not have a simple identity derived from cultural heritage but are constantly renegotiating and weighing up alternative futures within a forcefield of interlocking oppressions as well as some opportunities.

The difficulties should not, however, deter us from rethinking school curricula in relation to an increasingly insecure and impoverished

working-class. I use the term 'working-class' not to fall back on some anachronistic cultural stereotypes. I also wish to put aside, for a moment, the more encompassing Marxist sense in which the vast majority in our society depend on selling their time and their skills - their labour power – to the owners of capital or the means of production. This is an important definition, but, within that larger category, a sub-set is of particular interest for the School Improvement project, namely manual workers and the unemployed. The longstanding issues of educational disaffection for the children of manual workers have been exacerbated by the increasing polarisation between rich and poor in our society, resulting in areas of chronic unemployment and poverty.

Given the high correlation between poverty, limited parental education and underachievement at school, it is fair to suggest that the key policy makers, and some school improvement experts, are in denial. Improvement is scarcely possible unless we consider curriculum change which might make learning more meaningful and empowering to the children who are achieving least through the standard version. Paradoxically, in England, it is now the very schools which are succeeding least with the National Curriculum who have least scope to deviate from it!

> There is no need to remove the national curriculum requirements from successful schools because they are succeeding. Why change things? We have a success. The place where greater freedom is most needed is in those schools which are not succeeding. I tend to believe that the proposal is perverse. (Lord Dearing, May 2002)

Education Action Zones were given a mission to innovate in troubled inner-cities, but were then placed under such pressure to meet short-term performance targets that curriculum development was largely abandoned. There have been better models in the past. For example, the gulf between traditional academic curricula and Liverpool's inner city population led Eric Midwinter (1972) to develop a more relevant 'community curriculum' for its Educational Priority Area.

There is a danger that such a curriculum might restrict working-class children to an immediate culture and circumscribe their futures. How can this be avoided? What would a worthwhile curriculum involve for children growing up in poverty? When 19th Century socialists were presented with a curriculum of 'useful knowledge' serving industrial needs – the vocationalist option of its day – they declared it lacking and demanded '*really* useful knowledge', knowledge '*concerning our conditions in life … [and] how to get out of our present troubles'*. (in Johnson 1979)

Such a curriculum would include vocational experiences and skills, but also many opportunities to engage with local issues and expand understanding of the global forces which shape our lives.

> Rather than just a study of working-class culture and working-class life [such a curriculum] must be a study of the relations of the working class to the rest of society: the forces by which this relationship is created and sustained, and the ways in which this relationship can be investigated, questioned and eventually transformed. (Ozolins 1979:50, cited in Whitty 1981)

Cultural respect is vital, but an uncritical reflection of local life-styles would risk condemning the disadvantaged to the ghetto. In a different (postcolonial) context, Burtonwood (1986:153) argued for a curriculum which opens up new possibilities, for 'culture conflict' as well as 'culture contact', for the curricular potential of the counterculture:

> … an education which embraces cognitive change and expansion… a curriculum which gives pupils experience in the untamed margins of the world and the mind … a vision which is more creative and infinitely more optimistic than the cultural apartheid emanating from the relativism which would deny us access to other worlds. The job of schooling has always been to open windows on to wider worlds. (ibid:154)

The school improvement project needs to move beyond its compliance with an imposed curriculum which manifestly is not working in many schools. The rhetoric of entitlement and common standards need to be re-examined within the reality of a divided and unequal society, and solutions found which genuinely open opportunities to marginalised individuals and communities.

Curriculum and school culture in a changing world

The mismatch between an imposed curriculum and its target audience particularly affects marginalised young people who are little motivated by the promise of jam tomorrow if they would only persist at tasks which appear meaningless today. However, this cultural problem affects a larger group of students, particularly during adolescence.

Youth culture

The drive to improve schools involves youngsters who are themselves cultural constructs. Jane Kenway speaks of the construction of young children as consumers, and the relationships between identity, pleasure and purchase.

You buy delights... kids rule... adults are dim... and schools are dull. These are the canons of globalizing consumer cultures. In the places where kids, commodities and images meet, education, entertainment and advertising merge. Kids consume this corporate abundance with an appetite. Young people are being turned into 'desiring machines'. (Kenway 2001; see also Kenway and Bullen 2001)

By contrast, schools are 'pleasure-free zones', because of increased pressures to deliver results. In this context, the pressures of improvement through target-setting and high-stakes testing are unsustainable – the promise of 'jam tomorrow' simply will not compete with pleasure today for many adolescents.

This raises some vital issues. How can we develop forms of learning which involve personal satisfaction? We cannot simply compete with the media by providing instant gratification through soundbite flashes of knowledge, but we must turn schools into learning communities where young people gain satisfaction from cooperative problem solving and engagement in activity, and where students write for real audiences (including each other), not just for a teacher to grade. That means more flexibility in choosing issues which the students find meaningful, rather than a constant struggle to cover all the content in the schemes of work

A culture of achievement

Improvement processes are increasingly being examined in terms of *culture*. This must extend to investigating the relationship of students to the curriculum and their own learning. The connection between students and their curriculum is an important constituent of their 'hidden curriculum'.

This is particularly critical for learners living in poverty, or whose parents have had a poor experience of education. If these young people are unconvinced by school learning, if it appears irrelevant to their lives, if the promise of a good job when they grow up seems too distant and unlikely, if the hierarchies of school seem too close a replica of the hierarchies they can expect in working life, the situation cannot be 'turned round' simply by tightening the controls. The transformation of educational culture involves turning round the school in relation to young people.

This involves a better understanding of the interactions involved in school learning. Traditionally school work has been a form of *alienated labour*, rather like production lines in a factory. Borrowing the terminology of Marxist economics (originally from Adam Smith), learning is

seen to have an exchange value, never a use value. You're told what task to do, you perform it for a fixed period of time, you hand over the product, and it receives a mark (a surrogate wage). This reward is increasingly meaningless to you as you grow older – neither it, nor the gold stars or stickers or merit certificates you're promised will buy the things you want. The emphasis on extrinsic rewards as an incentive to improving results needs to be supplemented, if not replaced, by a transformation of school work so that it becomes intrinsically rewarding.

> Creating an achievement culture may mean establishing a strong counter-culture to the street environment, especially for boys. They need to feel a real thrill about their school work, gaining high self-esteem from what they produce there…
>
> To create an achievement culture, work of all kinds has to be collectively valued – displayed, read aloud, enacted, sat on, eaten, printed, performed, enjoyed. (Wrigley 2000b:10-11)

Authorship

The rigidity of a curriculum imposed from outside deeply affects the attitude to learning of a generation accustomed to rapid choice. It is no use arguing that young people's choices are often trivial – the logos on their clothes, channel-hopping on cable TV. Rather than denying choice in schools, we have to engage learners in making wiser choices.

Instead of a rush to cover a large number of specific objectives or an extensive body of content, we need a framework which highlights deeper aims and a smaller number of key concepts. There should be less concern with detailed objectives and more with broader aims and values. This would allow teachers to be more invitational, and to negotiate the choice of topic with their classes. It would create space for learning which engages with issues which are partly generated by the learners, and where students have a degree of *authorship* of the curriculum.

> How can we reconceptualise and reconstruct the curriculum in such a way that pupils, at least for part of the time, have an opportunity for fashioning some time for themselves so that they can pursue their own ideas and studies? (Davies and Edwards 2001:104)

One model for reconciling an overall structure with a range of student choice can be found in Denmark's social studies curriculum (akin to the emerging Education for Citizenship in Britain) (Ministry of Education, Denmark, 1995). This document provides an architecture which

exemplifies how learning can be rigorous as well as relevant and participatory. The successive stages involve

i) learners identifying issues they wish to pursue within a common theme to which they have committed themselves;

ii) teachers connecting social science concepts to experiences raised by learners;

iii) independent and small group research;

iv) a final plenary session which is more simply reporting back, but involves groups of students organising activities which provoke further discussion and debate.

Recommendations for planning the social studies curriculum in Danish schools

It can be valuable to work out a plan for the year, so that you can order resources in time and organise guest speakers etc., but the plan should consist of broad and open possibilities which give room for adjustments and changes, and not least to encourage and accommodate students' participation and co-responsibility.

Learning can start from a theme, which leads in discussion to the formulation of problems and issues. Alternatively, it can also arise from questions and issues which students themselves have brought to class. In this case, the students and teacher need to consider which theme will provide a framework for these issues or problems. In either case, use will be made of some social science methods or concepts.

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In the final stage, the results may take the form of reports, folders, posters etc. but they're not always a physical product. The students might produce their results as a talk, a drama or a simulation game, leading to discussion. This stage has great importance and isn't just a closure to the learning process. The learners should be clear that they may not be able to reach final conclusions, and that they're reaching provisional answers. The final stage also involves an evaluation by students and the teacher of the entire learning process.
(Ministry of Education, Denmark 1995)

Breadth and balance?

A wider understanding of achievement also needs to underpin the improvement project. This is not to suggest that students from working-class or minority backgrounds do not need examination success; they need it more than anyone, as a passport towards future opportunities, an objective demonstration of achievement which may partly overcome discrimination in gaining employment or entry to university. Nevertheless, examination results in themselves are simply not enough.

In chapter 2, in the context of bilingual learners of South Asian origin, I argued for a broad definition of achievement to include cultural and political learning, social and moral engagement, and intercultural understanding. We need to work at a similar definition for – no, *with* – other working-class communities. Improvement is not something that can be done *to* people.

It is questionable whether authentic learning can ever develop within a curriculum which is assessed in traditional ways. This is a key improvement issue. Do our modes of assessment – the very device whereby we evaluate and drive school improvement – actually undermine real learning? A Scottish exchange student, after two days in a progressive secondary school in Germany, expressed the difference wonderfully:

> Here, school's about *learning.* Back home, it's just about *passing.*

Assessment conveys deep messages to students about learning. The shift from norm-referencing to criterion-referencing has not achieved its desired result. The traditional norm-referencing placed children in rank order, gave them grades, and declared a proportion to have failed. The hybrid system now used in Britain (a ladder of criterion-referenced steps) leaves intact a sense of learning hierarchies, fixed obstacles to overcome, and children who have failed. It might have worked very differently – as a set of aspirational targets against which individual children strive for their personal best – but for the setting of national targets and crucial barriers (e.g. increasing to 80% the proportion of children reaching Level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2). Recent research shows the greater effectiveness of assessment as feedback, when work is returned to pupils with comments and advice but normally without marks, grades or levels (Black et al 2002).

Accountability and target-setting is leading to a trivialisation of learning. We need neither a return to the irrelevant high-level demands of the traditional academic curriculum, nor a 'progressive' absence of rigour, but rather a spotlight on the high-level demands of *critical engagement.*

This would involve what is commonly referred to as thinking skills but goes beyond it into a personal and collective engagement with real issues.

The metacurriculum of thinking

The vast expansion of knowledge, and its easier availability through information technology, require greater emphasis on thinking processes. Serious attention is being paid to a range of initiatives and models, from Thinking Skills programmes independent of specific curricula, through Children's Philosophy models rooted in narratives, to models closely related to specific subjects such as Cognitive Acceleration in Science Education (CASE) and related projects.

In *Smart Schools*, David Perkins emphasises 'knowledge about knowledge' or *meta*cognition. Examples include familiarity with ideas such as hypothesis and evidence, general problem-solving strategies, and an understanding about what evidence is like in different disciplines (e.g. formal proof in mathematics, experiment in science, argument from the text and from historical context in literature). He proposes giving more lesson time to metacognitive challenges:

> What do you do when you don't understand something if you want to understand it better? For example, what would you do if you wanted to understand something like Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, long division, or a suit of armor, just by thinking about it? What questions would you ask yourself about it? (Perkins 1992: 99)

Perkins suggests the following strategies for creating the *metacurriculum*, all of which can be incorporated into a content curriculum more successfully than by creating a separate Thinking Skills course:

- making more deliberate use of cognitive terms such as hypothesis, predict, contradictions

- challenging loose statements in everyday conversation such as 'Everybody has one', or 'This cereal is more nutritious'. (The teacher might ask 'Who exactly?' or 'More nutritious than what?')

- 'thinking on paper', or trying to represent an idea diagramatically as it emerges

- developing a passion for intellectual curiosity

- exploring similarities and differences between historical events or scientific phenomena, in order to generate larger concepts. (ibid:107-119)

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Teaching the metacurriculum within a course on the American Constitution

- Thinking about the design of the document (the purpose of the preamble, its inspirational tone, etc.)

- Examining the rhetorical devices ('We the People', which covers up the extent of disagreement at the time, and the fact that the majority were disenfranchised)

- What evidence it is possible to have about how people really thought in the past

- Comparisons with other documents such as the Declaration of Independence and Magna Carta ('documents that have set nations upon a path')

- Asking whether the school has a constitution, and what it should contain.

(Perkins 1992:128-130)

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I found similar attention to cognitive processes and deep concepts in curriculum planning at Plashet School, in the East End of London, a school with very high achievement levels despite extreme poverty in the area. This resulted from close cooperation between language development (EAL) teachers and the subject specialists. In history for example, deeper level concepts were identified which could be taught from a particular example. This included not only specific concepts (e.g. words such as bishops, pope, heaven and hell when studying medieval Christianity) but more fundamental concepts (hierarchy, social control) and historical processes (e.g. interpreting from images and literary texts). Each unit involved a key activity designed to engage students emotionally, linguistically and cognitively, for example drawing posters on heaven and hell based on Dante's Inferno, or writing a job description and interviewing candidates for the post of parish priest in a medieval village. (Wrigley 2000:70-73)

Superficial breadth or deeper understandings: 'essential' schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools (USA) is based on Theodore Sizer's belief that deeper thinking is more important than extensive content coverage. Each school joining the Coalition develops differently, but based on a few common principles and with extensive mutual support and learning. In Central Park East secondary school in New York, most teaching is divided into two broad areas, humanities and mathematics /

science. Within these areas, different specialists work together but with limits on the number of teachers each student will be taught by. The central manifesto for learning, The Promise, sets expectations for students and teachers to deepen learning in whatever they pursue. In each project, students are guided by five core questions:

- *Viewpoint*: From whose viewpoint are we hearing this? to who's speaking? Would this look different if she or he were in another place or time?

- *Evidence*: How do we know what we know? What evidence will we accept? How credible will such evidence appear to others? What rules of evidence are appropriate to different tasks?

- *Connections and patterns:* How are things connected together? Have we ever encountered this before? Is there a discernible pattern here? What came first? Is there a clear cause and efffect? What are the probable consequences that might follow from taking course x rather than course y? How probable? Is this a 'law' of causality, a probability, or a mere correlation?

- *Conjecture*: What if things had been different? Suppose King George had been a very different personality? Suppose Napoleon or Martin Luther King Jr or Hitler had not been born? Suppose King's assassin had missed? (Our fourth habit encompassed our belief that a well educated person saw alternatives, other possibilities, and assumed that choices mattered. They could make a difference. The future wasn't, perhaps, inevitable.)

- And finally – who, after all, cares? Does it *matter*? And to whom? Is it of mere 'academic' interest, or might it lead to significant *changes* in the way we see the world and the world sees us? Will it make us richer? More famous? More powerful? Can we know? (from Debbie Meier 1998:607-8)

Into the future

We have a very limited awareness of educational futures, and all too often computer technology appears as a universal panacea. Not that information technologies are unimportant, but that it is only one of the issues which should be shaping our thinking about future schools.

The state of Queensland, Australia is running a pilot project *New Basics* to develop a curriculum for the future (see *Education Queensland* website). Allan Luke outlines some core issues:

i)   *New youth cultures.*

New identities, new ways of growing up, new ways of learning, and so on. The problem is, 'These kids are not like us'.

Globalisation is leading to the emergence of world kids, post-modern kids who learn and behave differently – and we baby-boomers are struggling with how to deal with this – often attempting to draw them back into a nostalgic past.

New cultural contexts and identities are leading to multilingual and multicultural populations, cultural hybridity, new types of popular cultural texts, and new cultural identities.

ii)   *New fields of discipline and knowledge.*

The problem is not just about the knowledge explosion, but the difficulty we have dealing with whole new, often melded domains. Disciplines never are what they used to be, except in high schools.

iii)   *Persistent patterns of inequality.*

With the development of the knowledge economy, the old economy and class divide does not disappear.

Global economies are changing communities: semiotic / information economies; structural unemployment; contracts, out-sourcing and sub-contracting; service and information 'McJobs'; retrainability and educability.

iv)   *The 'unfinished business of nation building'*

Issues that are vexing Australia at the moment: our national identity crisis over our place in the Asia / Pacific, the variable kinds of control we have over flows of culture / knowledge/ bodies across boundaries and borders, the unfinished business of Reconciliation [the Aboriginal population], our analysis of the sustainability of our place on this land and on this planet, and the kinds of social and economic issues raised by new economies and divisions of wealth in this milieu. (Luke 2001)

Luke's fourth point, from an Australian perspective, illustrates how different globalisation looks from different places on the planet. Together, the four points establish a more thoughtful foundation for curriculum reform than an obsession with ICT.

Luke argues against the disempowering and deprofessionalising effects of a curriculum focused on accountability and high-stakes testing. He is

opposed to just adding on programs, or a 'wires and boxes approach where we put the technology in with the hope that it will then all be OK'.

The project seeks to align the New Basics curriculum framework, Productive Pedagogies and a new form of assessment known as Rich Tasks.

> The New Basics are futures-oriented categories for organising curriculum… clusters of essential practices that students need in order to flourish in 'new times'… There are four New Basics organisers and they have an explicit orientation towards researching, understanding, and coming to grips with the new economic, cultural and social conditions. These four clusters of practice are deemed to be essential for lifelong learning by the individual, for social cohesion, and for economic wellbeing. (Education Queensland 2000: New Basics)

Individual schools are responsible for choosing how to organise time and teacher responsibilities, but are recommended to emphasise connectedness, teamwork and, for secondary schools, a limited number of teachers working with students, for example:

> *Primary*: a team of three teachers in Years 4, 5 and 6 could plan a three-year curriculum program while maintaining their traditional classroom organisation
>
> *Secondary*: teams of five or six teachers work together with a group of students over a two-year period.

Transdisciplinary work in the New Basics project does not abandon academic disciplines, but requires a creative reconnection and reconstruction which will draw upon the knowledge and talents of teachers from different specialisms.

The rich tasks are a radically different form of evaluation and accountability from normal tests and exams. A rich task is:

> a culminating performance or demonstration or product that is *purposeful* and *models a life role*. It presents *substantive, real problems* and engages learners in forms of pragmatic social action that have *real value in the world*. The problems require identification, analysis and resolution… Tasks *connect to the world outside the classroom*.

Intensification or improvement?

School improvement for the 21st Century requires more than just an efficiency drive, or even an advanced understanding of change processes. In such a time of change as ours, this requires a rethinking of curriculum, its aims and content, and its relationship to teaching and assessment.

The literature of school improvement is clear on the need for ownership of the change process, but this sense of ownership is equally important for the curriculum. We face at present a debilitating contradiction between an imposed curriculum and the encouragement for schools to take responsibility for change.

Teachers and students need to recover a sense of *authorship and creativity*. This is not to propose an individualistic model, nor to deny the importance of wider frameworks beyond the single school. Broadly defined frameworks can be drawn up which allow ample space for local decision-making, with peer support and collaboration across a region or network. Curriculum development networks have the potential for significantly raising achievement, and already have some proven success.

The School Improvement project needs to grasp the nettle of curriculum design, in relation to a rapidly changing world but also in terms of the deep divisions within that world, globally and locally. This is not simply a matter of finding more efficient curriculum structures, but of opportunities which empower tomorrow's citizens towards democratic control of their troubled environment. In place of the curriculum of the dead, we need to launch a debate about a curriculum of hope.

Education Queensland: the New Basics

Life pathways and social futures : who am I and where am I going?
- living in and preparing for diverse family relationships
- collaborating with peers and others
- maintaining health and care of the self
- learning about and preparing for new worlds of work
- developing initiative and enterprise.

Multiliteracies and communications media: how do I make sense of and communicate with the world?
'Technologies of communication that use various codes for the exchange of messages, texts and information', including
- spoken language, writing and print
- visual media like photograph and film
- television and digital information technologies
- mathematics
- community and foreign languages and intercultural understanding,
- the creative and performing arts.

Active citizenship: what are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?
- interacting within local and global communities
- operating within shifting cultural identities
- understanding local and global economic forces
- understanding the historical foundation of social movements and civic institutions.

Environments and technologies: how do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?
An opportunity to 'examine and interact critically with the physical world'. It contextualises scientific understanding, and makes connections between science and technology and social, cultural, economic, environmental and ethical issues.
- developing a scientific understanding of the world
- working with design and engineering technologies
- building and sustaining environments.