

# *Secondary Education in Transition: the New Zealand Scene*

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To the Americans who attended the UNESCO Seminar on Teacher Education in the summer of 1948, the "lands down under" took on reality as we worked with and learned to know educators from across the Pacific. In this article by George W. Parkyn of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research—and New Zealand participant in the Seminar—American readers will recognize problems, reforms, and fears very like those encountered in our own efforts to provide a sound secondary education for the youth of our day.

THE HIGH SCHOOLS of New Zealand are at present passing through the second period of radical transition that they have known in the past fifty years. The result, we hope, will be the emergence of a system of secondary education which will give to every adolescent a free education of the kind which is best fitted to develop his aptitudes and to satisfy his needs.

## **The Culture Shapes the Schools**

New Zealand, as a settlement of European people, predominantly British in origin, is just over a hundred years old. Yet the oldest of her high schools, founded in the 1850's, are now very close to their centennial celebrations. High schools were established rapidly in all the main settlements almost on the morrow of their founding.

The colonists differed in many respects from one settlement to another but they all shared the nineteenth century middle class faith in education. Some of the settlements were intended to establish conditions of life which would make possible the existence in

the Antipodes of an aristocratic squirearchy. Their founders, Oxford or Cambridge men, passionately aware of their isolation from the cultural centers of Europe, brought with them the aristocratic English "public school" ideal and created secondary schools on the model of Eton, Harrow, Winchester, and Rugby.

Other settlements, leavened by colonists who brought with them the dissenting tradition of the urban middle class, were less concerned that their secondary schools should provide classical ornament for the minds of a rural governing class than that they should give a sound training in religion and industrial pursuits. A third distinctive element in the colonial pattern was provided by the Scots who brought their own system of comprehensive district schools. In these the elementary education suited to the lower classes and the secondary education reserved for the middle and upper classes were not kept separate and distinct as in England.

These different traditions were rapidly modified and, to some extent,

blended under the conditions of colonial life. On the one hand the English tradition of exclusiveness ousted the more comprehensive Scottish pattern. As a distinguished Scottish visitor, Dr. William Boyd expressed it at the 1937 Conference of the New Education Fellowship:

“. . . the serpent in the garden is the English influence in New Zealand education which has demoralized your institutions . . . What happened was that you let yourselves in for the English separation between primary and secondary education. Your high schools, rather of the English sort, were meant for an aristocracy, a selected group, and the old primary schools for the common or ordinary people.”

On the other hand, changes of considerable magnitude had occurred in the classical curriculum. The range of subjects taught soon included English language and literature, modern languages, science, geography, history, and manual arts. Moreover, the rapid expansion of primary schooling among the ordinary people and the increasing efficiency and cheapness of the primary schools after 1877, the date of the national primary Education Act, had caused the virtual disappearance of preparatory departments in the secondary schools; so that in place of the parallel system of primary and secondary schools on English lines we had, in fact, an “end-on” system.

### **High Schools Must Be for All**

In spite of these changes, however, the secondary schools remained selective and predominantly exclusive. With some justice they were charged with “providing the luxuries of education

. . . chiefly for the benefit of the wealthier classes and at the expense of the tax payer in general.” But the people of New Zealand, who at the turn of the century were keeping in power a “liberal labor” government remarkable for its radical experiments in social legislation, were ready to demand that the doors of the secondary schools be opened to all children capable of profiting by a secondary education. This was the way to enter the relative security of the Public Service and to obtain the comfort and dignity of the professions, and people were beginning to believe that the way should be open to all.

In 1902 the government offered the secondary schools six pounds per head for pupils admitted free. A third of the schools refused the offer, so in the following year an Act of Parliament compelled them either to accept government “free-place pupils” or to make their own provision for scholarships. The results were striking. In ten years the number of children in the secondary schools doubled; in little more than twenty years it had quadrupled. Soon the first phase of equalitarianism was complete. Almost any child of ability was assured a free secondary education, leading to the coveted university entrance qualification—passing the matriculation examination.

### **All Youth Must Be Served**

The movement for equal opportunity for all able children to get on, had, however, gone farther than anyone intended. While the secondary schools continued for the most part to provide courses suitable for children preparing to enter the university, by far the larger part of their pupils neither

intended nor would have had the ability to do so. The standard of the selective entrance requirement was not high enough to exclude from the secondary schools all but potential candidates for the Public Service and the University Examinations, yet the curriculum remained geared to their needs. Partly as a result of this, large numbers of children left the high schools after only a few terms; the majority began courses which they could not hope to finish; and sensitive teachers became more and more oppressed by the futility of much of their work and the real human wastage incurred.

The unsatisfactory nature of the whole situation was further emphasized when, in 1937, New Zealand's first Labor Government abolished the selective entrance examination, and the Minister of Education, in his 1938 report to Parliament, endorsed the principle of "secondary education for all" in these words:

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system. The structure of the New Zealand school system as originally laid down . . . was based on the principle of selection. An elementary education in the three R's was given to all the population, but, beyond that, schooling had to be either bought by the well-to-do, or won, through scholarships, by the specially brilliant. . . .

From the beginning of this country the vigor of this selective system has been

progressively relaxed . . . Yet the principle of selection for post-primary and higher education remained, and the present Government was the first to recognize explicitly that continued education is no longer a special privilege for the well-to-do or the academically able, but a right to be claimed by all who want it to the fullest extent that the State can provide.

The second phase of equalitarianism had begun.

### The University Lets Down the Bars

It was now clear to everyone that the secondary schools could no longer provide only an academic curriculum but that their course must be as rich and varied as the wide range of pupils who would now go to them. Already in 1939 the Secondary School Teachers' Association had recognized the need for a changed curriculum, but had felt that so long as the prestige of the University Entrance examination remained it would have a restrictive effect upon the schools.

In 1942 the University of New Zealand took the initiative. It agreed to change entirely the method of university entrance to one of accrediting. As from 1944 on it agreed to accept pupils from the major secondary schools if their principals certified that they were fit to proceed with university studies. The Entrance Examination remained for pupils of the smaller schools which had not been given the right of accrediting.

The Government Department of Education, thereupon, set up a Consultative Committee to consider the implications for the curriculum of secondary schools of the introduction of the accrediting principle by the Uni-

versity. The committee published its report in 1944, and its effect was felt at once. After a year of public discussion new regulations were issued by the Government, embodying the main proposals of the report.

### This Is Secondary Education Today

The general effect of these regulations is this. Children entering the secondary schools at the age of thirteen or fourteen years will follow a four-year course, leading to the general school-leaving certificate examination. The course must include for all pupils a "common core" made up of the following studies: English language and literature, social studies, general science, elementary mathematics, music, a craft or one of the fine arts, and physical education. The common core must involve the minimum hours each week, as given below.

It will be seen, therefore, that just under half of the school week at least must be spent on the subjects of the common core. The remaining time may be spent upon "optional subjects" which may arise either out of the core subjects when, for example, a child takes higher mathematics or specialized sciences, or be quite distinct studies, such as foreign languages or commercial subjects.

The core studies are intended, to use the words of the Consultative Committee, "to insure, as far as possible, that

all post-primary pupils, irrespective of their varying abilities and their varying occupational ambitions, receive a generous and well-balanced education. Such an education would aim, firstly, at the full development of the adolescent as a person; and, secondly, at preparing him for an active place in our New Zealand society as a worker, neighbor, homemaker, and citizen."

The optional studies supplementary to the core are intended to cater to the wide range of individual differences in aptitude and interest which the unselected adolescent population will show. The more intelligent children appear to be taking courses which include one or two foreign languages and some special science in addition to the core. Others take commercial courses, various technical courses, agriculture, horticulture, or additional manual work according to their ability and probable needs.

After a three- or four-year course pupils may take the School Certificate Examination which will be approximately as difficult as the former University Entrance Examination, but which gives a far more liberal choice of subjects. Each candidate must present himself for examination in English and in three or four other subjects to be chosen from a list of some thirty substantial studies.

It is usual for children who wish to enter the university to spend a further one or two years at school, in the "sixth

|                                 | First Year | Second Year | Total for Certificate |
|---------------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| English and Social Studies      | 5.5        | 5.0         | 14.5                  |
| General Science and Mathematics | 3.5        | 2.5         | 8.0                   |
| Music, Craft, and Fine Art      | 2.5        | 2.5         | 7.0                   |
| Physical Education              | 2.0        | 2.0         | 6.0                   |

form," after the School Certificate stage. It is here that specialization really starts. The core studies may now be dropped and a pupil may concentrate upon that group of subjects—languages, sciences, or social studies, for example—that he wishes to take in the university. The American reader will notice that the whole scheme is an attempt to strike the balance between the rather too rigid curriculum pattern of the European secondary school and the relatively shapeless curriculum which resulted in some American systems when the short-unit selective system was adopted in an extreme form.

#### **Dangers Are Recognized**

Almost the only criticisms of the reform come from those who fear that the most intelligent children will not get as solid an academic course as they once did. It is feared that the time devoted to core studies will not leave enough over for the study of foreign languages, higher mathematics, and special sciences. It is true, of course, that the compulsory provision of some time for social studies, music, and a craft or a fine art does involve some reduction in the time available for those subjects which used to form the bright child's staple curriculum.

On the whole, however, the fears would appear to lack sufficient ground. The brighter children will traverse the core curriculum more quickly than their fellows and will be able, in core time, to extend the range of their studies in English, history, geography, mathematics, and the sciences just as far as

they ever did. Only the foreign languages need to be taken outside the core time. Moreover, the length of time spent at the secondary school before entering the university is increasing—four years is now the minimum—and this increase will allow the schools to provide a broader education for the more intelligent children without sacrificing any of the academic standards of the traditional subjects.

A second fear is that the new subject integrations such as general science and social studies will be treated in a vague, woolly way and will not have as good an educative value as the older method of treating "authentic" history, "authentic" geography, and so on, as distinct subjects. That there is such a danger cannot be disputed; that it is greater than the earlier danger of the traditional teacher regarding "authentic" history as a list of sovereigns and dynasties and a compendium of battle diagrams showing the disposition of forces from Crecy to Malplaquet is open to doubt. And, moreover, it must be remembered that such integrations as those now adopted are, in the main, to be regarded simply as the minimum core. For the brighter children, the specialized studies of history, geography, economics, physics, chemistry, or botany will become differentiated from the core in accordance with their interests and needs.

It is still too early to make any accurate assessment of the results of these changes. But it is certain that the next ten years are destined to be of crucial importance in the history of secondary education in New Zealand.



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