

**SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND
EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

**A RESPONSE
SUBMITTED BY
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AUGUST 2008**

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Inquiry into Academic Freedom

Terms of Reference

Senator Fifield, pursuant to notice of motion not objected to as a formal motion, moved business of the Senate notice of motion no. 3—That the following matter be referred to the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee for inquiry and report by 11 November 2008:

The current level of academic freedom in school and higher education, with particular reference to:

1. the level of intellectual diversity and the impact of ideological, political and cultural prejudice in the teaching of senior secondary education and of courses at Australian universities, including but not limited to:

1. the content of curricula,
2. the content of course materials,
3. the conduct of teaching professionals, and
4. the conduct of student assessments;

2. the need for the teaching of senior secondary and university courses to reflect a plurality of views, be accurate, fair, balanced and in context; and

3. ways in which intellectual diversity and contestability of ideas may be promoted and protected, including the concept of a charter of academic freedoms.

Author

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- written over 400 articles for Australia's daily media (*The Herald Sun*, *The Age*, the *Courier Mail*, the *Financial Review*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Canberra Times*) and journals (the *IPA Review*, *English in Australia*, *Curriculum Perspectives*, *Quadrant*) and appeared on radio and television, both state and national,
- published *Why Our Schools are Failing* (2004) and *Dumbing Down: outcomes-based and politically correct – the impact of the culture wars on our schools* (2007),
- taught for 18 years and been a subject co-ordinator at Melbourne's Merrilands High School, St Helena Post Primary and Camberwell Grammar School. Kevin has also been a member of Victoria's Year 12 English Panel of Examiners and marked scripts for English and English Literature,
- acted as a member of the steering committee for the federally funded enquiry into the Australian Certificate of Education (2005) and national review of year 12 subjects (2006),
- completed a federally funded project benchmarking primary intended curriculum documents in mathematics, science and English against overseas systems (2005),
- acted as a consultant (1997-2003) to the federally funded *Discovering Democracy* Civics and Citizenship Programme, been a member of the Victorian Board of Studies (1997) and consultant to the federally funded boys' education program (2003),
- completed a comparative analysis of the New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement for the NZ Education Forum (2000) and benchmarked the New Zealand school curriculum (2002 and 2007),
- completed a analysis of Mathematics, Science and English curriculum across a range of school systems, both national and international, to inform the benchmarking exercise undertaken by the Victorian Department of Education (1998 -1999), and
- acted as Executive Officer (1998-1999) to the Internet-based 'Achievers Against the Odds' Project (a joint Project between the Rotary Districts of Victoria and the Department of Education) and Director (1998-2003) of the 'I've Got the Power' anti-smoking youth program funded by Philip Morris.

In 2004, Dr Donnelly was Chief of Staff to the Hon Kevin Andrews, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations.

Executive Summary

If we are egalitarian in our intention we have to reshape education so that it is:

- *part of the socialist struggle for equality, participation and social change, rather than an instrument of the capitalist system;*
- *a vital weapon in the transition to more equal outcomes for disadvantaged groups and classes rather than a ladder to equal educational opportunity for individuals;*
- *a catalyst for system change rather than the legitimisation of system maintenance,*

Joan Kirner, 1983, Speech to the Victorian Fabian Society

... we have succeeded in influencing curriculum development in schools, education departments and universities. The conservatives have a lot of work to do to undo the progressive curriculum.

Pat Byrne, 2005, Speech to the Queensland Teachers Union Conference

In response to the terms of reference, this submission argues that academic freedom in schools and tertiary institutions has been in the past and continues to be compromised by the cultural-left's long march through the institutions. Instead of education being impartial and disinterested, what is taught, how it is assessed and how education is perceived is driven by an ideological, politically correct agenda.

Evidence that education is biased towards a particular ideological view is manifold and includes much of teacher training, the work of professional associations and teacher union groups as well as the curriculum – both in terms of content and how it is assessed. Since undertaking teacher training in the mid to late 70s, acting as a branch president for the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, completing post-graduate degrees in education and writing for the daily media, I have identified numerous examples of how education has been adversely affected by the cultural-left (see the following extract from *Dumbing Down* for details).

There is an alternative, instead of being ideologically driven, education should be premised on the belief that it can be impartial and disinterested. The guiding light is the search for truth and while there are few absolutes, drawing on the established disciplines of knowledge, it should be possible to better approximate the truth of things and to see the world objectively. The opposite, where knowledge is subjective or simply the result of how power is distributed and enforced, verges on epistemological suicide as such a stance makes it impossible to judge, in a rational way, between competing truth claims.

Education, especially the curriculum, instead of enforcing a politically correct agenda, should acknowledge the enduring influence of a liberal-humanist view of education, associated with the rise of Western Civilisation and that can be traced back over some hundreds of years. Since the time of the early Greek philosophers and sophists, evolving over the centuries and incorporating aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition and historical movements associated with the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, a liberal-humanist view of education is concerned, to use Matthew Arnold's expression when writing about culture, with "getting to know, on all the

matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world”. Contrary to the way it is characterised by its cultural-left critics, a liberal-humanist view of education is very much concerned with developing independently minded, critical thought and what constitutes accepted knowledge and understanding evolves and changes with debate, new discoveries, paradigm shifts and the passage of time.

Dr David Green, an analyst at the London based Institute of Economic Affairs, in summarising an address to the Mt Pelerin Society given by the historian Max Hartwell, describes a liberal-humanist view of education as follows:

The content of a liberal education, he (Max Hartwell) says, should embrace civility, morality, objectivity, freedom and creativity. By civility he means respect for other people; by morality, the elementary maxims such as honesty and fairness; by objectivity, belief in the disinterested examination of facts and arguments, without fear or favour; by freedom, the principle that children should be equipped to exercise personal responsibility; and by creativity, belief in the advance of knowledge – not the perfectibility of man, but the possibility of progress.

Hartwell points out that a liberal education can be more easily defined negatively than positively: it is not utilitarian or interest-serving; it is not vocational or professional; it is not specialist or one-sided; it is not conformist and uncritical; it is not education for doing; it is disinterested, it is general and universal, it is critical and inventive, it is education for thinking and understanding.

In addition to adopting a liberal-humanist view of education, more needs to be done to ensure that education, especially state-mandated intended curriculum documents such as the proposed national curriculum, is balanced, fair and free of ideological cant. The content of teacher training courses and teacher professional development, including how academics are appointed, should also be open to review in order to ensure balance. One practical option worthwhile exploring is enforcing a charter of academic freedom and appointing an ombudsman to ensure compliance.

If required, I am happy to appear in person before the Senate Committee to clarify this submission and to answer any questions.

Contact Details

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1. Education and the culture wars¹

The challenge for us is to frame our position in a way that can successfully counter the culture war that is currently being fought...

Pat Byrne, President, Australian Education Union, 2005a

People are looking increasingly to send their kids to independent schools for a combination of reasons. For some of them, it's to do with the values-driven thing; they feel that government schools have become too politically correct and too values-neutral.

John Howard, Prime Minister, 2004

In order to understand why outcomes based education is so prevalent in Australia and why particular subjects like history and literature have been dumbed down and made politically correct, it is essential to examine the impact of the culture wars on education, in particular, the way in which the curriculum has been hijacked.

Much of the education debate in Australia focuses on issues like class sizes and how much money is spent, the respective standing of government and non-government schools and whether academic standards are high enough. Equally as important is the question of what is actually taught, or not taught, in schools and the types of values and beliefs that are passed on to students.

In subjects such as literature, history and politics, education has a vital role to play in introducing and dealing with moral and ethical values. While the success of an education system can be measured by such things as pass rates, success at year 12 and teaching employment skills, for the health of Australian society and for the benefit of young people, it is also vital to stress the cultural² role of schools.

While institutions like the family and the established religions play a central role in teaching children about morality – how to decide right from wrong, the correct balance between rights and responsibilities and what constitutes the good life – given the reality of compulsory education, the school curriculum is also of great consequence. The significance of what happens at school is made even more important given the empty and destructive influence of so much of popular culture represented by the slogan: if it feels good, do it.

In January, 2004 John Howard, in seeking to explain why so many parents choose to send their children to non-government schools, suggested that one of the reasons was that government schools are too politically correct³. While not giving specific examples

¹ The following is an extract from *Dumbing Down Outcomes-based and politically correct – the impact of the Culture Wars on our schools* (Kevin Donnelly, 2007, published by Hardie Grant Books). If required, a Bibliography can be supplied by the author (kevind@netspace.net.au).

² Based on Raymond Williams (1988) discussion of the term, culture can be defined as a particular way of life identified by a unique process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.

³ Dinesh D'Souza (1992), when tracing the rise of political correctness during the late 60s and early 70s in the United States, describes it as typifying a progressive, left-wing view on issues such as "black

on this occasion, it is possible to identify what he has in mind. Whether teaching a black armband view of Australian history, one where children are made to feel guilty about the sins of the past instead of celebrating what we have achieved as a nation, uncritically promoting cultural diversity represented by multiculturalism or adopting a non judgemental approach to learning where all views are considered of equal worth, the Prime Minister's view is that education has become overly left-wing and new age. As a result, increasing numbers of parents are deserting the government system in search of values such as discipline, respect for authority and strong academic standards, more commonly associated with non-government schools.

The President of the Australian Education Union, Ms Pat Byrne, argues that the Prime Minister's criticism of government schools is simply a cynical political ploy. In order to win votes, especially the votes of aspirational parents living in marginal electorates, conservative politicians like the Prime Minister and the former education minister, Brendan Nelson, argue that the curriculum, especially in the state system, is politically correct and one sided. In seeking to explain why the Coalition won the 2004 federal election, Ms Byrne said:

The Coalition has cast the education debate in the terms of conservative values. It has framed the debate in terms of choice, excellence, quality, values, discipline, and has done it very effectively. Nelson's use of the single example – the parent pleading for help, a teacher pushing a political agenda – is done with great effect; wasted on us of course because we see what he is doing. We are furious - affronted, assaulted. We defend. We provide facts, as if telling the truth is all that is needed for people to say, "Oh dear, we've been wrong all this time. We'll vote Labor next time."

Byrne, 2005

Given the electoral success of what she sees as a conservative, right-wing cultural agenda associated with leaders such as John Howard, George Bush and Tony Blair, Ms Byrne also argues in her 2005 speech that those committed to left-wing causes are on the back foot and that: "This is not a good time to be progressive in Australia; or for that matter anywhere else in the world!".

Welcome to education and the culture wars.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, education has been a battleground in the clash of ideas. At this time Western society experienced a cultural revolution represented by Woodstock, flower power and a revolt against established authority symbolised by the church, the state and the traditional family. Students took to the streets marching against the war in Vietnam, many travelled the hippy trail via Asia to Europe and beyond and the rights of victim groups such as women, indigenous Australians, migrants and the working class took centre stage.

As noted by the Australian academic, Alan Barcan:

The essential feature of the cultural revolution of 1967 – 1974 was the

consciousness and black power, feminism, homosexual rights, and, to a lesser degree, pacifism, environmentalism, and so on".

rejection of traditional authority. The most startling aspect of this was the new sexual freedom. The new morality favoured relativism; absolute beliefs, based on Christianity or liberal humanism, became unfashionable. Politically, a new radicalism and a new concern for minorities emerged.

Barcan, 1993, p 104

Many of those students radicalised during the 1960s and 1970s went on to become public servants, teachers and academics and they identified education as a key instrument in overturning the status quo. For many, such as the Australian Education Union, professional associations like the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and many teacher academics, education was, and continues to be, a key instrument to change society. Instead of education being balanced and impartial, where students are presented with the range of opinions on often sensitive and controversial issues, the belief is that they should be indoctrinated with what is politically correct. Instead of believing that education provides a ladder of opportunity, where those with the ability and a willingness to work hard can do well, the belief is that the school system reinforces inequality and social injustice. As argued by Joan Kirner, one time education minister and Premier of Victoria:

If we are egalitarian in our intention we have to reshape education so that it is:

- *part of the socialist struggle for equality, participation and social change, rather than an instrument of the capitalist system;*
- *a vital weapon in the transition to more equal outcomes for disadvantaged groups and classes rather than a ladder to equal educational opportunity for individuals;*
- *a catalyst for system change rather than the legitimisation of system maintenance,*

Kirner, 1983, p 11

The impact of the culture wars and political correctness on Australian education has been great. Over the last 30 or so years schools have been pressured to adopt a progressive and new age stance on issues as diverse as multiculturalism, the environment, the class war, peace studies, feminism and gender studies. The Australian Education Union argues that teachers should support students who protest against the war in Iraq, professional organizations argue that the purpose of education should be to empower students to overthrow the status quo and subject associations politicise education by arguing that subjects like English must be used to teach students the correct way to vote, that is, against conservative governments. Generally speaking, students no longer have the opportunity to study history or literature in any systematic or balanced way and, as a result, many leave school culturally illiterate and ethically challenged.

1.1 Dracula in charge of the blood bank

The potentials for a progressive educational response that are certainly present in their (teachers) situation, have to be met with encouragement and support from other groups who influence the situation in the schools, and influence peoples' ways of thinking about it. This includes parents, kids, school administrators, intellectuals, the women's movement, and the labor movement generally. All have a responsibility for the way the social struggle about education turns out, and whether the conservative hegemony recently established will be reversed.

In the most basic sense, the process of education and the process of liberation are the same ... At the beginning of the 1980s it is plain that the forces opposed to that growth, here and on a world scale, are not only powerful but have become increasingly militant. In such circumstances education becomes a risky enterprise. Teachers too have to decide whose side they are on.

Connell, et al, 1982, pp 207- 208

The above quotation is taken from a book that was set widely in teacher training courses during the 1980s. Although many parents and the general public might be forgiven for thinking there is much of value in Australian society – high standards of living, a free and open civil society and a legal and political system based on the rule of law and separation of powers – those responsible for the above quotation feel the opposite. For them, Australian “society is disfigured by class exploitation, sexual and racial oppression, and in chronic danger of war and environmental destruction”. Given such a pessimistic and negative view, the above authors are in no doubt as to the role of education and the role of teachers. Instead of education and teachers being impartial and balanced, conservatives are identified as the enemy and teachers are told they must ensure that their classrooms become a key battleground in winning the culture wars⁴.

The following chapter will outline the left's long march through the institutions⁵ and detail the way in which teacher academics, subject organisations and professional associations have sought to change the curriculum. In part, the focus on schools can be explained by the fact, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the former USSR, that communism has failed. Given capitalism's survival and the impossibility of Western societies like Australia embracing a socialist revolution, the next best thing is to take control of institutions like schools in order to transform society. As acknowledged by the American social commentator, Roger Kimball (2000, p 14), during the late 1960s and early 1970s, many on the left in Western, industrialised countries concluded that while violent confrontation had little chance of success, given the power of the state and the unwillingness of the

⁴ The intention in writing this book is not to attack or denigrate classroom teachers; the majority of whom get on with the job under difficult circumstances. Instead, it is to throw the public spotlight on those in charge of subject associations, teacher training and curriculum development who seek to impose their pet ideologies and fads on schools.

⁵ Aronowitz and Giroux (1985, p 11), in explaining the left's decision to radicalise institutions like schools, acknowledge the influence of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1971 Edition).

population to embark on the revolution, the next best thing was to take control of society's cultural institutions:

In the Sixties and Seventies, after fantasies of overt political revolution faded, many student radicals urged their followers to undertake the "long march through the institutions. The phrase, popularised by the German New Leftist Rudi Ditchke, is often attributed to the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci – an unimpeachable authority for countercultural standard-bearers ... In the context of Western societies, "the long march through the institutions" signified – in the words of Herbert Marcuse – "working against the established institutions while working in them".

A related justification for targeting education is the belief, drawing on the works of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, that education is powerful tool used by those more privileged in society to maintain and consolidate their position. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where he argues, in the same way that capitalist society reproduces itself through controlling the economic system, the education system privileges certain forms of knowledge, skills and expertise that benefit dominant forces in society, is useful in explaining the left's focus on transforming schools. Within Australia, Joan Kirner (1983) and Bill Hannan (1985) both argued that competitive examinations, a belief in meritocracy and the way students were selected for tertiary study worked against the interest of working class and migrant students and advantaged the wealthy and middle class. In a Victorian Fabian Society (1983) pamphlet entitled *Education – Where From? Where to?* John McLaren (1983, p 6) makes similar point:

Teachers are alienated by being required to perform the function of social sorting, students by being required to choose either to accept the role assigned to them by the school or to drop out. Rather than promoting excellence in any sense, the school thus becomes society's primary instrument in dividing labour to meet the requirements of industrial capitalism.

The concept of hegemony, referred to in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, signifies that there is nothing inherently worthwhile about hard work and ability being rewarded in schools or a preference for academic studies. Many argue that such common sense beliefs are enforced by those controlling society in order to maintain their dominant position and to ensure that victim groups are marginalised. As noted in relation to literature, the concept of hegemony is employed by feminists to attack traditional fairytales and in history teaching, instead of focusing on significant historical events and figures and celebrating what we have achieved as a nation, the focus is on the dispossessed and the excluded, such as women, migrants and Aborigines, and promoting a politically correct perspective on such matters. As a result, when studying those involved in Australia's federation, instead of looking at significant historical figures like Edmund Barton or Alfred Deakin, students are told to study so-called victim groups, such as women and indigenous Australians, who were not involved in any of the federation conferences.

As a result of the destructive impact of postmodernism and deconstruction⁶, an argument is also put that how we relate to and understand the world around us – including language, literature, history, politics and a study of culture and society more broadly – is subjective and relative. The author of *Where Have All The Intellectuals Gone*, Frank Furedi, describes the current intellectual climate in the following way:

Unfortunately, contemporary culture regards truth as a subject worthy of fiction rather than an intellectual pursuit. It is frequently argued that there is no such thing as the truth. Instead of the truth, people are exhorted to accept different opinions as representing many truths. Michael Foucault's claim that there is 'no truly universal truth' has gained widespread influence in academic circles. Truth is rarely represented as an objective fact; it is frequently portrayed as the product of subjective insight, which is in competition with other equally valid perspectives. Relativism – a perspective that contends that conceptions of truth and moral values are not absolute but are relative to the persons or groups holding them – has acquired a commanding influence over cultural life.

Furedi, 2004, p 8

Advocates of postmodernism and deconstruction argue that nothing is inherently true or worthwhile as our perception of the world is conditioned by our own intensely personal response and ideological baggage. Each person relates to the world in a subjective way and each person's experience of the world is relative as understanding and knowledge, so the argument goes, are not absolute. As noted by Pope Paul II (1998):

Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned. This has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread scepticism. Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain. A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth.

Australia's OBE curriculum documents not only argue that how individuals relate to and understand the world around them is relative, they also are committed to a belief in cultural relativism on the basis, supposedly, that all cultures should be valued equally and it is wrong to suggest that Western civilisation, and the values and beliefs on which it is based, are in any way superior. The Italian philosopher, Marcello Pera (2006, p 11), describes the argument put forward by the left as follows:

The notion that the judgement of cultures or civilizations constitutes an invalid mode of inquiry has been put forward, most notoriously, by the school of thought known as relativism. Various names have been given to

⁶ It should be noted that old style Marxists, given their belief in the objective reality of the class war, have little time for postmodernism and deconstruction, as these more recent theories suggest that there are no absolutes and that each person constructs his or her subjective reality.

this school today: post-enlightenment thinking, post-modernism, “weak thought”, deconstructionism. The labels have changed, but the target is always the same: to proclaim that there are no grounds for our values and no solid proof or argument establishing that any one thing is better or more valid than another.

An argument is also put that how we communicate, especially using language, is incomplete as it is impossible for words to tell us with any certainty about the real world or how we relate to it and one another. As a result, with subjects like history and literature, the focus is on each person having his or her own personal interpretation and understanding. On reading Jane Austen’s *Emma*, there are as many interpretations of the novel as there are students in the class and there is no one correct interpretation of historical events like the Eureka Stockade. As noted by Bruce Wilson, relativism has had a significant impact on Australian OBE curriculum:

We offer little general guidance about the relative value of different areas of the curriculum apart from a broad injunction concerning literacy and numeracy. We are, characteristically of this point in cultural history, almost unable to make distinctions of value.

Bruce Wilson, 2002

Those committed to a left-wing view of English also argue that teaching critical literacy has a central role to play in helping students analyse texts and the world around them in terms of power relationships. As argued in a paper given at a national English teachers’ conference in 2005:

Critical theories of literacy derive from critical social theory and its interests in matters of class, gender and ethnicity, and are related to critical pedagogy and critical language awareness. Critical pedagogy, also originating from critical theory, is designed to oppose the dominant ideologies, social institutions and material conditions that maintain socio-economic inequality ... Teachers who subscribe to critical literacy have a stake in social change – no matter how small – and aim to encourage students to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and social practices that advantage particular social groups over others.

Emmitt and Wilson, 2005, p 2

Similar to the arguments put forward by the Brazilian Marxist educator, Paulo Freire, learning to read is no longer simply a matter of translating and understanding what is on the page, in the words of Emmitt and Wilson the purpose of teaching literacy is to provide: “a powerful tool in educating children for a better world”. As suggested by the Australian academic, Colin Lankshear, this better world embraces those values and beliefs dear to the left. Lankshear argues that critical literacy embodies the “social ideal of democratic life, justice and human emancipation” and that a vital role of this radical approach to English is to free students from :

... the regressive values in society, which are internalised into consciousness – such as racism, sexism, class bias, homophobia, a

fascination with the rich and powerful, hero-worship, excess consumerism, runaway individualism, militarism, and national chauvinism.

Lankshear, 1994, p 22

The left argues that Australian society is fraught with inequality and injustice and the solution is to present young Australians with a politically correct view of such matters and to ensure that students mimic the correct ideological line. It should also be noted that whereas English teaching has always been concerned with the world outside the classroom, and helping students to engage in public debate and to be able to think independently, advocates of critical literacy adopt a cultural-left view on issues and, as a result, confuse education with indoctrination.

Competitive, academic year 12 examinations are also criticised as politically incorrect. An argument is put that it is wrong to suggest that anyone with ability can succeed as competitive examinations ensure the success of wealthy students from leafy middle class suburbs to the detriment of working class and non-English speaking background students⁷. The rationale for the Victorian Cain/Kirner Labor Government replacing the then Higher School Certificate with the Victorian Certificate of Education was because the existing certificate was seen as elitist and socially unjust. It is ironic that after the new Victorian year 11 and 12 certificate had been in place for some years research⁸ concluded that it was failing to assist the very students it was originally designed to help.

The result of the left's long march? Much of teacher training, instead of giving teachers a substantial and rigorous knowledge of how to teach important skills like numeracy and literacy, focuses on social justice, critical literacy and the need to embrace change. In itself, not so bad, the problem is that such concepts are interpreted from a progressive, new age perspective and there is little opportunity for trainee teachers to express or to learn about opposing views. One of the most egregious examples of such bias is the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania's submission⁹ to the Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry into teacher education. In outlining its educational philosophy, the faculty is quite happy to state that it supports the: "radical curriculum change in Tasmanian schools by adopting the new *Essential Learnings Framework* to transform the curriculum and practice of Faculty pre-service teaching programs"¹⁰. Given the experimental and contentious nature of the OBE inspired Essential Learnings curriculum, one would have thought the duty of teacher educators, instead of endorsing the new curriculum, would be to place it in a wider educational context and to support trainee teachers in its critical evaluation.

⁷ Ignored is the outstanding academic performance of many SEAsian students who arrived in Australia after the fall of Saigon; the success of such students in gaining top year 12 results demonstrates that hard work and effort are rewarded.

⁸ See *The Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* (Victoria, DEET, 2000) and *From Place to Place* (Birrell, et al, 2002).

⁹ See Faculty of Education University of Tasmania's *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 'Inquiry into Teacher Education'*.

¹⁰ In 2006, the Tasmanian Education Minister, David Bartlett announced that Essential Learnings was to be replaced by the Tasmanian Curriculum and that there would be a greater emphasis on the traditional curriculum – one wonders how the Tasmanian Faculty of Education will respond.

Subject associations like the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the professional groups like the Australian Council of Deans of Education are also strident in imposing their views on the purpose of education and what should happen in the classroom. Finally, the school curriculum, in particular, subjects like English, history and politics, has been rewritten to make it politically correct. Not only has history as a subject largely disappeared, to be replaced by studies of society and the environment, but Australian history has been rewritten to promote a black armband view. In English, everything is now considered a worthwhile text for study, whether SMS messages, graffiti, *Australian Idol*, students own writing or such literary classics as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Hamlet*, and correct spelling, punctuation and syntax are no longer required when sitting tests and examinations¹¹. Instead of valuing the moral and aesthetic value of great literature, the focus is on analysing texts in terms of power relationships and how texts marginalise the disadvantaged and the dispossessed.

1.2 Teacher academics

Many of us cut our teaching teeth in a climate of advocacy related to student-centred pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Frierian(sic) notions of empowerment have been the 'bread and butter' for those of us concerned with teaching, particularly teaching involving the 'Other'. If we were lucky, we did our teacher training with long-haired academics who had real, that is school-based teaching credentials, preferably from working class schools, who taught us that we were to go into classrooms to teach students, not subjects. We were to instil in our students feelings of self-worth premised on the value of what these students already knew and the value of what they wanted to learn, rather than the intrinsic worth of what we wanted to teach. Our job was to produce young adults who would challenge the status quo through skills of critical inquiry. Within the classroom of the self-styled liberatory pedagogue there existed clear distinctions between the marginal and the mainstream.

Tsolidis, 2001, p 99

In the above description of what occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, Georgina Tsolidis, a teacher academic at Melbourne's Monash University, identifies many of the characteristics of the politically correct approach to training teachers. Based on the theories of the Brazilian Marxist educator, Paulo Freire¹² and the new sociology of education movement¹³, the belief is that education must empower individuals to act on the world in order to challenge existing power structures. Once again, challenging the "status quo through skills of critical inquiry" and describing the role of the teacher as "the self-styled liberatory pedagogue" has a decidedly left-wing flavour. Whereas, the more conservative approach to education places the subject centre stage, while at

¹¹ The literacy test associated with PISA does not penalise students for faulty spelling, punctuation and grammar (see Lokan, et al, 2002, p 210), nor does the proposed Western Australian year 12 English examination (see The Marking Key of the Western Australian sample WACE English Examination Paper – Curriculum Council of Western Australia 2006, p 17).

¹² Freire visited Australia during the 70s and his books were widely set in education courses - see Freire (1972) and Freire (1974) for a description of his educational beliefs.

¹³ See Chapter 3 for an explanation of the new sociology of education movement and its impact on the school curriculum.

the same time recognising the importance of the student, the progressive approach is student centred. As argued by Tsolides, “we were to go into classrooms to teach students, not subjects”. In line with the self-esteem movement associated with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, teachers are also told that promoting student self-worth is more important than teaching the “intrinsic worth of what we wanted to teach”.

No wonder many students begin tertiary studies with an inflated sense of their own ability and worth, even though many cannot write a properly structured essay and cope with the required level of algebra. One of the results of promoting self-esteem is that research associated with the Third International Mathematics and Science Study shows that Australian students, when compared to better performing students in a number of other countries, have a higher sense of their self-worth and academic ability, even though they are consistently outperformed in such tests.

Basing what happens in the classroom on the “what students already know and the value on what they wanted to learn”, instead of essential content associated with key subjects, has led to a dumbed down curriculum and falling standards. As noted in the report *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula*¹⁴, Australian curriculum documents are superficial and patchy and not as academically rigorous as those available in stronger performing overseas countries such as Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Many children also leave primary school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills¹⁵ and university academics complain that the level of understanding and ability of undergraduates has deteriorated over time¹⁶.

Fast forward from the 1970s and 1980s to how teachers are currently being trained and it is apparent that little has changed. A review of Australian schools of education shows that all are committed to concepts like “social justice”, where the focus is on “the socially transformative role of education”. Trainee teachers are also told to give priority to “socio-cultural models of teaching and learning”, one where they recognise “cultural and individual differences” and “respond positively to students from all categories of socio-cultural difference – gender, class, demographic location, disability, ethnicity, colour, sexual identity”. Schools of education also argue that schooling is “socially and historically constructed” and “meaning is embedded in socio-cultural experience”.

The flaws in this politically correct approach to education are many. Knowledge and learning are not simply socio-cultural constructs; there is a reality represented by the laws of physics, what goes up generally comes down, and basic mathematical algorithms, 2 plus 2 equals 4, that transcend cultural differences and that have universal application. Professor Igor Bray¹⁷, head of the Western Australian branch

¹⁴ The benchmarking report was undertaken by the author - see Donnelly (2005) and was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.

¹⁵ As noted by Dr Andrew Leigh (2005) notwithstanding the additional millions spent, since the 1970s literacy scores, depending on the measure, have either stagnated or declined. The 1996 national literacy tests showed that 29% of year 5 children could not read at the minimum level and 33% of year 5 children did not meet the minimum standard in writing.

¹⁶ See Anderson et al (2003) in which a national survey of tertiary academics concludes that almost half of those interviewed felt that standards of first year students had declined over time.

¹⁷ See Igor Bray, ‘Re: Physics paper in Wednesday’s West’ thread on PLATO forum at www.platowa.com (21/6/06).

of the Australian Institute of Physics, makes a similar point when he argues that “if we don’t get the mathematics right, bridges fall down and aeroplanes fall out of the sky”.

The Adelaide based author, Tony Gibbons¹⁸, also points out that because different cultures regard something as valid and worthwhile, it does not mean that such beliefs are either helpful or true. For many years, European sailors thought the world was flat and if they sailed too far they would fall off the end of the world; some tribes in New Guinea believed that if they built a miniature landing strip on the top of a ridge, then supplies would automatically be flown in and some cultures believe in witchcraft. One of the characteristics of the search for truth associated with the Western concept of being rational is that such beliefs can be evaluated and proven to be either right or wrong.

An additional concern in treating all cultures as equal is the failure to discriminate in terms of what is just and to recognise that some cultural practices are unacceptable. Mainstream Australian culture is derived from its Anglo/Celtic heritage and the very values, such as tolerance and fairness, that allow diversity are based on Judeo-Christian morality. Australia’s legal and political systems also owe their unique character to this nation’s Western heritage¹⁹. These are the very things that are downplayed in the curriculum and, as a result, many Australian students leave school with a fragmented and impoverished knowledge and appreciation of Australia’s cultural heritage²⁰. Given the politically correct belief that education should be non-judgemental²¹ and that it is wrong to acknowledge Christian values, it is also the case that many students leave schools morally adrift.

Two professional associations advocating the culture wars in education are the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) and the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE). ACSA describes itself as “a broadly based educational association representing the interests of participants in curriculum work from all levels of institutionalised education” (ACSA, 1987) and the Australian Council of Deans of Education describes itself as “the peak organisation representing deans of faculties of education and heads of schools of education in Australian universities and other higher education institutions” (ACDE, 2004). Both are significant players in Australian education and in a key position to influence the curriculum and the work of schools. Not only do both groups lobby governments on a regular basis, organise conferences and teacher in-service, publish journals and seek to influence the public debate, but representatives from both groups are regularly appointed to government sponsored educational reviews and curriculum projects.

One way to describe the relationship between schools and the wider society is to describe education as providing a ladder of opportunity. While it is true that not all in

¹⁸ See Gibbons (2004) for a thoughtful and convincing argument as to why knowledge is not simply a personal or cultural matter.

¹⁹ Those on the cultural-left sometimes criticise the Western tradition as being monocultural and exclusive, the reality is that it has drawn on a variety of cultural traditions ranging from ancient Greece and Rome to ancient China and Islam.

²⁰ See Peel (2000) and ACER (1994) for evidence of students’ lack of cultural literacy.

²¹ The irony is that while those committed to political correctness argue that values should be non-judgemental, they are quite happy to force their own values, in areas like multiculturalism and environmentalism, on unsuspecting students.

society are as wealthy as one another or are as advantaged in terms of what they own and where they live, education provides an avenue for advancement. Based on ability and hard work, it is possible to achieve success and to use education as a springboard to increased material wealth and social prestige²². Evidence that the Australian education system provides a ladder of opportunity can be found in the OECD's analysis of how the children of immigrant families cope in different education systems around the world. In some countries migrant children are disadvantaged in that they perform poorly in relation to local students, not so in Australia, where an analysis of the OECD report concludes:

School systems vary widely in terms of their outcomes for immigrant children, the report makes clear. In some countries, such as Canada and Australia, immigrant children perform as well as their native counterparts.

Finfacts Team, 2006

Those committed to a left-wing view of education and the culture wars argue the opposite. Not only is Australian society characterised by inequality and social injustice, but the argument is put that schools, instead of alleviating disadvantage, play a powerful role in reproducing inequality. The ACSA policy statement entitled *Policy on Social Justice, Curriculum and Pedagogy* characterises society as one involving "inequality, oppression, exclusion and exploitation" and argues that a belief in merit is misplaced and unfounded:

One important delusion is the occasional movement of small numbers of people across levels of differential power. Those who accomplish this in an 'upward' direction are held up as shining lights who demonstrate that mobility is merely a question of motivation, application, talent or endeavour. These individuals simply hide the fact that powerlessness and educational disadvantage are inherently structural and cyclical and hence little to do with 'merit', and that others of their disadvantaged, disaffected and disenfranchised groups can never hope to emulate their transition, with or without 'merit'.

ACSA, 1996

Instead of recognising the important role schools play in passing on the essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with subjects like mathematics, science, literature and history, such subjects are described as "a social, historical, and material construction which typically serves the interests of particular social groups at the expense of others" and the purpose of schooling is defined as promoting increased equity and social justice:

... schools must work on several levels to redress injustice in a society which fails to recognise it, and often to act upon it effectively when it does.

ACSA, 1996

Of course, as already suggested, one way that schools can be effective in reducing inequality is by providing a ladder of opportunity. Not only do groups such as ACSA

²² As will be argued in the chapter outlining a liberal/humanist view of education, in addition to wealth and social prestige, it is vitally important that education should be valued for its own sake.

refuse to accept the idea of merit, they also argue that more traditional approaches to education must be rejected. Competitive assessment, where some pass and some fail, streaming students according to interest and ability, a curriculum that stresses the need to deal with written texts and schools where students are taught to respect authority are all labelled as socially unjust²³. It is ironic that surveys²⁴ suggest that parents are voting with their feet in moving from government schools to non-government schools in search of the very values denigrated by those associated with ACSA. It is also significant, at a time when the community expects schools to be held accountable for their performance and when many parents support their right to choose between government and non-government schools, that ACSA describes accountability and parental choice as leading to increased disadvantage and inequality. While accepting that there has been an increase in concern about social inequality in education, ACSA bemoans the fact that:

There are, however, counter trends in current educational policies that may submerge these issues. The campaigns for more funding for private schools, for the privatisation and commercialisation of public education, for more standardised testing, for more formal and rigid curricula, and for a narrowed view of academic standards and basic skills also have powerful implications for social inequality.

ACSA, 1996

Given the types of policies advocated by ACSA, it should come as no surprise that the organisation is a critic of the political and social agenda associated with conservative governments. In particular, such is the degree of angst about the Howard Government's support for non-government schools and its policies in areas like multiculturalism and reconciliation that ACSA supported the publication of *Going Public: Education policy and public education in Australia* on the basis, since its election in 1996, that the government had embarked on policies calculated to damage the public education system²⁵. In opposition to the argument that standards have fallen, or remained static, and that parents should be supported in their choice of non-government schools, the ACSA funded book argues that there is no literacy crisis and that support for non-government schools must be cut back. Not only does the book's preface describe it as being "an unashamedly partisan" and a "call to arms", but the concluding chapter argues that the years of Coalition Government represent a reactionary and destructive period where:

²³ See ACSA (1996, p 22).

²⁴ One survey paid for by the National Council of Independent Schools' Associations (NCISA, 2002) discovered that parents were concerned about a "society adrift from core values and discipline" and they felt that non-government schools, compared to government schools, better addressed such issues. The view that parents see non-governments schools better able to address values was also supported by research carried out by the ACER for the Fairfax Press (Doherty, 2004).

²⁵ The ACSA brochure advertising *Going Public: Education policy and public education in Australia* describes the book as evaluating the Coalition's education policies and their "damaging effects on students, teachers and educational managers" and in the book's conclusion the government's policies are described as "tearing at the sinews of public education" (ACSA, 1998, p 105). As an aside, it should be noted that ACSA's condemnation of the Howard Government has not stopped the organisation applying for and being paid to manage Commonwealth funded curriculum projects and conferences in areas such as values education and civics and citizenship.

Derisive comments about the 'black arm-band' view of history and the 'politically correct' thought police have provided a cover for a wave of reactionary policy development which has fanned deep-seated prejudices, hatreds and fears that obviously lurk beneath the cosmopolitan veneer of Australian society. Phillip Adams (1997) has aptly called it 'The Retreat from Tolerance'. Such attitudes touch every aspect of Australian society, infecting its key institutions and the values that sustain them. Public education has not escaped.

ACSA, 1998, p 105

The Australian Council of Deans of Education also advocates a left-wing, new age view of education. In *New Learning A Charter for Australian Education* (ACDE, 2001), the education system, in particular, the existence of non-government schools, is described as a “gift for those already born into privilege” and only serving a “small elite”. Once again, the politics of envy come into play as the deans of education argue that the move to non-government schools is because they are better resourced as a result of increased government funding. Ignored is the reality that the overwhelming majority of schools in the non-government system, in particular, local parish Catholic schools, are under resourced and that research²⁶ suggests that parents choose non-government schools on the basis of their values, not their budgets. Much like the ALP’s 2004 federal election policy of withdrawing funding from so-called elite non-government schools, the deans also argue that:

Elite private schools are as unlikely to go away as inequality itself. However, when there is so much disadvantage and until education fully serves the needs of the knowledge economy, they do not need government support.

ACDE, 2001, p 124

It is also ignored that in sending their children to non-government schools parents save governments the cost of educating such children, in addition, private school parents also pay taxes that are used to fund a system they do not wish to use. Based on the 2005 Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services, the average recurrent cost of educating a student in a government school is approximately \$10,000. On average, non-government school students receive about \$5,595 in government funding; a saving to government of approximately \$4,400 for each child attending a non-government school. The Productivity Commission estimates that the financial sacrifice of independent school parents (excluding Catholic school parents) amounts to a saving of \$2.2 billion dollars to state governments.

In addition to its hostility to non-government schools, the deans of education also promote a new-age view of curriculum summed up by the term ‘new basics’. The three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic – and the knowledge, understanding and skills associated with traditional school subjects are condemned by the deans as obsolete, old fashioned and, in the brave new world of the information age and the knowledge economy, irrelevant:

²⁶ See Partington (1990), NCISA (2003) and ACER (2004) for evidence supporting the view that parents choose non-government schools based on values and not better resources.

But the old learning focused on only a narrow slice of learning, and shaped a narrow orientation to knowledge and the world...

Actually, the very idea of the basics indicated something about the nature of knowledge: it was a kind of shopping list of things-to-be-known – through drilling ‘times tables’, memorising spelling lists, learning the parts of speech and correct grammar.

ACDE, 2001, p 88

As with many of the attacks mounted by the cultural warriors of the left, the first thing to be said about the above is that it presents a simplified and misleading caricature of the old basics. Most classroom teachers, given the dramatic changes that occurred to curriculum during the 1970s and 1980s, have embraced a range of teaching techniques incorporating both the traditional and the more innovative. Long gone are the days of Mr Gradgrind, portrayed in Dicken’s *Hard Times*, and his exhortation:

Now, what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!

A good deal of educational research²⁷ into how children best learn also suggests that rote learning, memorisation and activities like mental arithmetic and memorising poems and songs, especially during the early primary school years, are critical to educational success. Not only does learning lower order skills, like reciting times tables, lead to such matters being automatically recalled, but energy and concentration is then freed to attempt higher order problems and tasks. Especially when learning to read, if children are stumbling over every word and syllable, as they have been taught a whole language ‘look and guess’ approach instead a phonics approach, then not only is meaning lost, but the process becomes disjointed and frustrating.

In opposition to the old basics, a situation where there are “right and wrong answers”, the deans argue that learning must embrace the new basics represented by “problem solving skills, multiple strategies for tackling a task, and a flexible solutions-orientation to knowledge”. In the type of new-age jargon most often associated with the corporate, managerial world of business consultants and strategic reviews, the deans suggest that the purpose of education is about “creating synergies, by using networks and by forming alliances” and training young people to be “flexible and collaborative learners”. Forgotten is the reality is that if students, especially in primary school, have not mastered foundation learning in areas like literacy and numeracy, then it is impossible to achieve success in later years.

Contrary to what the deans suggest when arguing that “Mathematics is not a set of correct answers” and that “literacy (is not) a matter of correct usage – the word and sentence-bound rules of spelling and grammar”, there is also the point that an essential part of learning is getting it right. In the real world represented by buying

²⁷ See Cuttance and Stokes (2001), E.D. Hirsch (1997), Farkota (2003, Chapter 2) and Sweller (2002) for a number of arguments in favour of more direct and formal teaching methods.

and selling at the local milk bar or market being able to add and subtract is crucial; when building bridges or skyscrapers it is also good if the designers and engineers can correctly understand and measure the physics of load bearing. While the conventions associated with writing an SMS message allow faulty spelling, punctuation and syntax, there is still an expectation that undergraduates can write correctly and employers generally expect reports and briefings to be intelligible and properly written.

One of the tenets of progressive education is a commitment to a constructivist view of teaching and learning. Constructivism, instead of placing the teacher and what is to be taught centre stage and adopting more formal and direct styles of teaching, argues that the student must be the focus, that learning must be related to his or her interests and classrooms should adopt open - ended tasks where students work more in groups than individually or as a class as a whole. Evidence that professional associations like the Australian Council of Deans of Education and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association have had a significant impact on promoting such new-age approaches to teacher education can be found in the report *Teaching Reading* (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). After surveying teacher training institutions across Australia, the report notes:

... too many faculties and schools of education in Australian higher education institutions currently providing pre-service teacher education base their programs on constructivist views of teaching. Westwood (1999), for example, highlights the results of a South Australian study which found that most teachers (79%) had been strongly encouraged to use a constructivist approach in their initial teacher-education courses and during in-service professional development programs. Even more notably, 67 per cent of the teacher trainees in this study indicated that constructivism was the only teaching approach to which they had been exposed in their teaching method courses.

Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, p 30

Dr Rhonda Farkota, a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research, makes a similar point about the pervasive influence of constructivism, when she states:

Any comprehensive comparison of the literature and the research on student-directed approaches to learning, alongside teacher-directed learning, will show that the empirical data heavily favours the latter as being the more effective method yet almost every teacher-education program in Australian universities is based on a student-directed approach.

Farkota, 2005

The impact of constructivism, especially in areas like whole language and fuzzy maths, has led to falling standards and a dumbed down curriculum.

One might expect that teacher educators, given their qualifications and training, might be able to express themselves clearly and succinctly. On reading how they describe their work it quickly becomes apparent that such is not the case. As evidenced by the following examples, jargon and edubabble reign supreme. In the new-age education

system, teachers are described as “facilitators” or, worse still, as “curriculum workers who are contextually-aware, ethically-sensitive, culturally-inclusive and socially-just”. Students are described as “knowledge navigators” and “active meaning makers”. Teaching children to read is described as working “within a critical, social-constructivist framework” where students are introduced to “multi-model mediated texts”.

1.3 English teachers’ association

My main concern is with what the election tells us about our profession. English for the last ten years – not least on the pages of this journal – has trumpeted the cause of critical literacy ... What does it mean for us and our ability to create a questioning, critical generation that those who brought us balaclava’d (sic) security guards, Alsatians and Patrick’s Stevedoring could declare themselves the representatives of the workers and be supported by the electorate?

We knew the truth about Iraq before the election. Did our former students just not care? We knew that before the election that ‘children overboard’ was a crock, but as it was yesterday’s news, did they not care about that either. Do they care about the detention centres – or, the sheer greed that drives our relations with East Timor... has English failed not only to create critical generations, but also failed to create humane ones?

Sawyer, 2004

In the extract above, Wayne Sawyer²⁸, in his position as editor of *English in Australia*²⁹, argues that English teachers have failed in their job to teach what he terms critical literacy. As evidence that teachers have failed to teach young people to think correctly (that is, the way he thinks they should), Sawyer cites the fact that in the 2004 federal election many young Australians voted for the return of the Howard Government, a government, in relation to its education policy, that Sawyer describes as “like Thatcher’s, ironically Stalinist”. Similar to other cultural warriors of the left, such as Pat Byrne, Sawyer refuses to accept that voters, in re-electing a conservative Commonwealth Government, may have known what they were doing and voted in a rational way. Sawyer also ignores that fact that the general public expects English teachers to teach students how to read and write and to respond to literature in a discriminating and ethical way, instead of telling them how to vote. Such is Sawyer’s disquiet, that he calls on English teachers to re-double their efforts to teach students how to think correctly by adopting an even stronger form of critical literacy, he suggests “Does critical literacy need to turn from concern with nineteenth century artefacts and the class/gendered nature of fairytales to become more overt about texts of the here and now?”.

²⁸ In addition to editing *English in Australia*, Sawyer was President of the NSW English Teachers’ Association and Chair of the NSW Board of Studies English Curriculum Committee and author/editor of over 20 books and monographs on English teaching.

²⁹ *English in Australia* is the journal of the Australian Association for the Teachers of English. Of interest, after the public furor over the political nature of Sawyer’s editorial, is that those responsible for the AATE webpage removed the article.

Of interest, given the Sawyer editorial sparked a public debate about whether professional associations and classroom teachers should become involved in such political matters, is the response of those associated with the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE). Paul Sommer, a past President of the AATE, argues there is nothing wrong with Sawyer's editorial and that critical literacy is an essential aspect of English teaching, on the basis that:

Times have changed. It is a complex world, especially for our students. Social theory, curriculum writing, and teaching methodology have made attempts to recognise the fact.

Sommer, 2005

The President of the Australian Capital Territory Association for the Teaching of English, Rita van Haren³⁰, in addition to acknowledging the influence of Paulo Freire, also argues that critical literacy has a powerful role to play helping students to analyse texts in terms of power relationships. Ms Haren suggests that one reason why critical literacy is under attack is the possibility that "government ministers do not want ordinary citizens to be able to question their political decisions".

The Tasmanian education department's website³¹, when outlining the importance of English as a subject, defines critical literacy as "the analysis and critique of the relationships among texts, language, power, social groups and social practices".

Those familiar with what was once termed clear thinking will appreciate that a vital aspect of English teaching has always been to teach students how to critically evaluate arguments, to recognise different types of persuasive techniques and to understand how individuals, and the public more generally, can be manipulated. For many years, clear thinking was an important part of courses like Victoria's Matriculation English Examination. It is also true that classic novels like *Brave New World* and *Animal Farm* and Swift's pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* deal in a very explicit way with a range of persuasive techniques employed to control the way people feel and think.

Within the culture wars, clear thinking is re-badged as critical literacy and given a left-wing slant. Students, no longer, are taught how to identify and deal with different persuasive devices, such as generalisations and ad hominem arguments, instead, they are taught to analyse texts in terms of power relationships and what is considered politically correct, especially in areas like gender, ethnicity and class³². The Tasmanian website, when outlining the benefits of critical literacy, suggests:

Critical literacy provides us with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices. It enables us to address disadvantage and to become agents of social change.

Tasmanian Department of Education, 2005

³⁰ See 'Critical Literacy: Educating all students to be active participants in a democratic society', Haren (2005).

³¹ See <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/english/critlit.htm>

³² In April, 2006 Prime Minister Howard sparked a heated public debate when he criticised the way students are made to analyse literary works from a critical literacy perspective.

Historically, one of the main functions of English has been to teach children to read and write. As such, literacy was defined in a straightforward way as the ability to read and write at the required level. More recent definitions of literacy, such as found in *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools* (DEETYA, 1998), expand this more traditional view of literacy to include:

... the ability to read and use written information, to write appropriately, in a wide range of contexts, for many different purposes, and to communicate with a variety of audiences. Literacy is integrally related to learning in all areas of the curriculum, and enables all individuals to develop knowledge and understanding. Reading and writing, when integrated with speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking, constitute valued aspects of literacy in modern life.

DEETYA, 1998, p, 7

Literacy is no longer simply a matter of learning to read and write, not only are skills such as listening, viewing and critical thinking included, but there is a recognition that students have to successfully communicate in an increasingly diverse range of contexts, for different purposes and to different audiences. In itself, the more expanded definition of literacy is reasonable³³ as the world in which young people move no longer relies on the dominance of the printed word; whether film, video, computer graphics or DVDs, the reality is that images, pictures and sounds surround young people as never before. While it is vital that students first master the printed word and the place of quality literature is safe guarded, there is a strong argument that so-called multi-modal texts should also be included in the English classroom.

Where there is cause for concern is when those associated with the AATE go one step further and, as in the words of Allan Luke and Peter Freebody, advocate a heavily politicised view of literacy; one where “cultures are ridden through and through with complexity and difference, with conflict over power”. Learning to read is no longer a matter of dealing with marks on a page, instead, teachers are told that literacy is intensely political and an important tool to help establish the type of society admired by the left:

As a result, we do not view how to teach literacy as a "scientific" decision, but rather as a moral, political and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices that are needed to enhance peoples' agency over their life trajectories and to enhance communities' intellectual, cultural and semiotic resources in print/multi-mediated economies. Literacy education is ultimately about the kind of society and the kinds of citizen/subjects that could and should be constructed. Teaching and learning just isn't a matter of skill acquisition or knowledge transmission or natural growth. It's about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions. And 'failure' at literacy isn't about individual skill deficits – it's about access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts.

Luke and Freebody, 1999, p 1

³³ While accepting a broader definition of literacy, the first priority should be on teaching students how to read and write and to deal with complex and substantial printed texts.

In suggesting that literacy education “is ultimately about the kind of society and the kinds of citizen/subjects that could and should be constructed” it is clear that those close to the AATE have moved a long way from defining literacy as the ability to read and write. Marie Emmett and Lorraine Wilson are quite happy to assert in a paper given at a national English teachers conference “we see literacy teaching as being more than reading and writing for understanding; literacy teaching must also include critical literacy”³⁴. As has already been noted in discussing Wayne Sawyer’s editorial, in which he criticises English teachers for their failure to teach young people the correct way to vote in federal elections, the reality is that critical literacy is weighted towards a socially progressive view of the world. Pam Gilbert reinforces the view that critical literacy is weighted towards a left-wing stance on how one should analyse texts and relate to society, when she describes the purpose of critical literacy in the following way:

It is to explore how language practices are used in powerful institutions like the state, the school, the law, the family, the church, and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of inequalities and injustices. For teachers, it means engaging with issues that are often controversial, certainly contemporary, and perhaps quite volatile.

Gilbert, 1993, p 325

Another problem with the new definition of literacy is that students are not always corrected for faulty spelling, punctuation and grammar. In opposition to the argument that literacy standards in Australia have remained static or fallen over the years³⁵, defenders of OBE argue that Australian students perform at the top of the table in international tests such as the Programme for International Assessment (PISA)³⁶. Ignored is that even though the PISA 2000 test seeks to measure literacy skills, students’ answers are not corrected for faulty spelling and punctuation and, if corrections had been made, many would have failed. As observed by one Australian researcher:

Errors in spelling and grammar were not penalised in PISA – if they had been, probably all countries’ achievement levels would have gone down, but there is no doubt that Australia’s would have. It was the exception rather than the rule in Australia to find a student response that was written in well-constructed sentences, with no spelling or grammatical error.

Lokan et al, 2002, p 210

In the new Western Australian senior school English examination students are not penalised for faulty punctuation, spelling and grammar. As stated in the draft examination paper:

Each student response should be marked for the demonstration of the understanding of the question asked, as illustrated by the marking criteria

³⁴ See Emmitt and Wilson (2005, p 1).

³⁵ Andrew Leigh (2005) in a paper presented at the 2005 Australia New Zealand School of Government conference argues: “...troubling new evidence suggests that literacy and numeracy scores have stagnated or fallen since the 1970s – despite a doubling of resources”.

³⁶ PISA is an international test developed by the OECD to measure the literacy, science and mathematics skills of 15 year olds.

given. Student responses should not be penalized for poor spelling, punctuation, grammar or handwriting, unless these are elements of aspects or outcomes specifically being assessed.

Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2006, p 17

Studying literature is another area that has been influenced by developments in English teaching since the mid to late 1970s, in particular, the advent of critical literacy³⁷. The more traditional approach to studying literature emphasises the moral and aesthetic qualities of what students read. In reading *Huckleberry Finn*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* students follow the plight of characters faced with moral dilemmas and choices; should Huck feel guilty about betraying his friend Jim, the Negro slave, how is Macbeth's conscience affected by his murdering Duncan, the King, and his subsequent actions and what is the impact of war on Jim, the central character in *Fly Away Peter*? Children's stories like CS Lewis' *Narnia* series also present readers with the consequences of betrayal and guilt and highlight how one character's actions can profoundly impact on others. In addition, studying literature provides the opportunity to appreciate how language can be used in its most poetic form. Not only can students learn about poetic devices such as alliteration and metaphors, but the musical quality of good writing also helps to develop an ear for the rhythms and cadence of language. As noted by Brian Crittenden (1990) and James Moffett (1981), in addition to its inherent value, reading literature helps to develop and strengthen the types of writing skills needed for successful communication at the senior secondary and tertiary level.

A more conservative approach restricts the definition of literature to those plays, poems, novels and short stories that use language in an imaginative way to say something moving and profound about human experience and what DH Lawrence terms the "relationship between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment". The enduring and timeless quality of good literature, such as the works of Shakespeare, the poetry of William Blake or Greek tragedies like *Oedipus*, ensures that classic literary texts will continue to be read and performed long after television soaps like *Neighbours* or films like *The Terminator* have long since disappeared.

The AATE, through its conferences and seminars and its journal *English in Australia* and other publications³⁸, has undermined the more conservative approach to literature and replaced it with a radically different approach. Whereas literature was once centre stage, according to the AATE, everything, from tissue boxes to graffiti to *Australian Idol*, is now considered a worthwhile text for study. As argued by the English academic, Terry Eagleton:

...we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category of 'literature' is 'objective', in the sense of being eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature - Shakespeare, for example - can cease to be literature.

³⁷ While critical literacy is the main focus of discussion here, it is important to note that the more conservative view of literature has been under attack from numerous other theories, ranging from deconstruction to feminism to critical theory and postcolonialism. See Macey (2000) for definitions.

³⁸ See *The Making of Literature* (Reid, 1984) and *Reconstructing Literature Teaching: New Essays on the Teaching of Literature* (Thomson, Ed, 1992).

In a book published by the AATE, Ian Reid (1984, p 13) argues the same case when he states that the traditional definition of literature is “untenable”. As a result of changes to the way literature is defined, all Australian curriculum documents now use the general description ‘text’ when referring to what should be studied in the English classroom. As shown by the recent debate over senior school English in Victoria, Western Australia and NSW - where students might only read one novel over two years and where examinations include students responding to SMS messages, film posters and images - the reality is that literature, as previously defined, has lost its central place in the curriculum.

It is worth noting that Australia is not alone in the way literature has been transformed into cultural studies, where students are taught to analyse texts in terms of power relationships and as examples of how those more powerful in society are able to exert control. As noted by Patai and Corral, literature has been under attack throughout the English speaking world from a range of opponents and, as a result:

What theorists of all these persuasions have in common, whatever their individual differences, is a decisive turning away from literature as literature and an eagerness to transmogrify it into a cultural artefact (or “signifying practice”) to be used in waging an always antiestablishment ideological political struggle.

Patai and Corral, 2005, p 8

The impact of critical literacy has not only been to drown literature in the general category of text, equally as damaging is the way the moral and aesthetic value of literature is ignored in favour of teaching students to respond in terms of what is politically correct. Not only do those associated with the AATE argue that teaching students to respond to literature with sensitivity and discrimination should be condemned as “bourgeois, patriarchal, ethnocentric”³⁹, but teachers are told that traditional approaches to literature “reinforce dominant cultural ideologies”. In the brave new world of the critical literacy classroom, the purpose of studying texts is not to enjoy or to value what is written, but to bring about social change. In the words of academics associated with the Australian Literacy Educators Association⁴⁰:

We would argue that text analysis and critical reading activities should lead on to action with and/ against the text. That is, there is a need to translate text analysis into cultural action, into institutional intervention and community projects.

Luke, et al, 2001, p 117

In April 2006, the way literature was taught at a Sydney based independent girls’ school, SCEGGS, was cited as an example of the way the more traditional approach to literature has been subverted. Instead of valuing Shakespeare’s *Othello* for what it suggests about human nature and the impact of emotions such as love, betrayal and

³⁹ Cranny-Francis (1992, p 44).

⁴⁰ The quotation is taken from ‘The Significance of Language in Critical Literacy’ - Emmitt & Wilson (2005).

jealousy, senior school students are made to respond to the play using a Marxist, feminist and racial perspective⁴¹. Ms Jenny Allum, the school's Principal, defends interpreting Shakespeare in such a way on the basis that:

(it is) not a history course with a deep understanding of Marxism and all the — it is a literary theory about how we read a text and so the girls will understand that the questions they should be asking is (sic) — who controls the power and how do they control it and who feels disadvantaged and (is) taken advantage of in society .

Sunday Show, 9th July 2006, p 2

In response to the news report, some argued that what was happening at SCEGGS was simply one incident and that the reports of the death of literature are premature. Unfortunately, the opposite is the case. An analysis of how year 12 English is taught in New South Wales shows that the progressive approach associated with critical literacy and 'theory' is widespread. The revised English syllabus was introduced in 2001 and, as noted by Barry Spurr⁴², an English academic at the University of Sydney, the new course embodies many of the characteristics of the new English. The definition of texts is exploded to include:

... communications of meaning produced in any medium that incorporates language, including sound, print, film, electronic and multimedia. Texts include written, spoken, nonverbal or visual communication of meaning. They may be extended unified works or presented as a series of related pieces.

New South Wales Board of Studies, 1999a, p 8

In an attempt to make English contemporary and relevant, Spurr also makes the point that some of the texts chosen for study have little, if any, literary value or worth, and that students are forced to study literary texts in terms of socio-political themes such as consumerism. In relation to how literature is now taught in NSW schools, in addition to *Othello*, year 12 students must also deconstruct the Australian novel *Cloudstreet* in terms of multiple perspectives, including genre, gender (feminist), socio-political (Marxist), cultural, post-colonial, spiritual and psychoanalytical. Literature was once about stimulating the joy of reading and learning to respond with discrimination and sensitivity, as a result of critical literacy students are now made to adopt a range of politically correct perspectives and much of what should be valued is lost. That literature should not be reduced to being studied through the prism of 'theory', especially Marxism, is argued by FR Leavis, when he says:

The ways in which it (literature) is at odds with Marxist theories of culture are obvious. It stresses, not economic and material determinants, but intellectual and spiritual, so implying a different conception from the Marxist of the relation between the present of society and the past, and a different conception of society. It assumes that, enormously – no one will deny it – as material conditions count, there is a certain measure of spiritual autonomy in human affairs, and that human intelligence, choice

⁴¹ See 'Elite girl's school kills the study of literature' (Ferrari, 2006b).

⁴² See Spurr (2001).

and will do really and effectively operate, expressing an inherent human nature.

Leavis, 1984, p 184

That literature has been devalued is also because advocates of critical literacy argue that there is nothing universal or enduring about great literature. As argued in the Tasmanian Education Department's outline of the English Learning Area:

We no longer consider texts to be timeless, universal or unbiased. Texts are social constructs that reflect some of the ideas and beliefs held by some groups of people at the time of their creation.

Tasmanian Department of Education, 2005, p 2

Once again, relativism raises its head as the argument is that there is nothing enduring or profound about particular texts, especially literary texts⁴³. A related concern is the implication that all texts are of equal value as they are simply "social constructs" and, therefore, it is impossible to argue with any certainty that students would better spend their time studying Shakespeare instead of *Australian Idol*. In April, 2006 John Howard sparked a debate about current approaches to teaching texts when he criticised the influence of postmodernism (otherwise known as 'pomo'). While not a defender of the Howard Government, the Australian playwright, David Williamson, also publicly criticised current approaches to teaching English in schools on the basis that great literature is universal and enduring:

I thought the postmodernists' credo, that there was no such thing as a human nature and we were just creatures of our immediate society and its ideologies, was nonsense. We can all palpably understand the jealous fury of Medea at her husband leaving her for another woman in a "text" written over two thousand years ago. We can also identify with and become engrossed in the jealousies, and political infighting between powerful families in the Icelandic sagas written over eight hundred years ago.

What great writing does is identify the enduring truths about human nature that cross time and culture. Shakespeare was undoubtedly hierarchical and patriarchal, but he was also better than any writer before or since at analysing the powerful universal human motives that drove his characters and still drive us.

Williamson, 2006

Whereas the more conservative approach concentrates on understanding and responding to what is actually written in a text, on the basis that the author intends to say something and that words have a commonly agreed meaning, the politically correct approach to English embraces the view that as reading is subjective, it is impossible to restrict a text to having a commonly agreed understanding. The difference between the more traditional and the more progressive view of reading can best be illustrated by noting the change in the way teachers are told to teach reading. The 1994 *A Statement on English for Australian Schools* states that:

⁴³ The argument that there is nothing enduring and profound about texts has particular significance to those religious texts, such as the Bible, the Koran, the Dhammapada, that have endured for hundreds of years and have so much to say about the nature of truth and spiritual enlightenment.

Teachers encourage students to recognise that some interpretations of a text are more justifiable, by reference to the text, than others, and show students how to find a cite elements of a text to support a particular view about it.

Curriculum Corporation, 1994, p 22

Clearly, the assumption is that how one responds to a text is not simply a matter of giving free reign to one's personal thoughts and feelings. In particular, in relation to literature, not only has the author attempted to convey something, to varying degrees either successful or not, but, whether an individual's interpretation is closer to the truth or not can be judged by referring to the world of the text. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, it is true that after the marriage ceremony Angel tells Tess that he had, some time before, while in London, "plunged into eight-and-forty hours dissipation with a stranger". Tess forgives her husband and, given his openness, she recounts her relationship with Alec d'Urberville and the fact that she is no longer a virgin. Those students who fail to follow the course of events and to understand what happens to characters and when have misinterpreted or misunderstood the novel. It is also the case that whereas Tess forgives her husband, Angel is incapable of showing the same forgiveness and he soon deserts the marriage. On reading the novel it is clear that Hardy presents Angel's actions as unfair and hypocritical and that the reader is led to a similar conclusion. While some readers might take the view that Angel is justified in rejecting his new wife, clearly the novel suggests otherwise. That readers have to respect and be true to what Umberto Eco terms "the intention of the text" is argued when he states:

Reading works of literature forces on us an exercise of fidelity and respect, albeit within a certain freedom of interpretation. There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true.

Eco, 2005, p 4

More recent advice to teachers about teaching reading denies that some readings of a text are closer to the truth than others, as reading is subjective and relative, and students must be freed to experience "multiple"⁴⁴ and "alternative"⁴⁵ meanings. As argued by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English:

Students thus learn that meaning is made in the interaction between the individual and the text, rather than existing in the text itself. A text may suggest a range of meanings to different people in different contexts, and the meaning a reader makes of a text will be influenced by the intentions and personal experience the reader brings to the text, by his or her cultural

⁴⁴ In the Queensland year 12 literature syllabus, students are asked to "apply a range of reading approaches to texts, including making multiple readings of a single text" (Queensland Studies Authority, undated, p 5).

⁴⁵ The Queensland English syllabus states: "Students understand how discourses influence the interpretation and construction of textual representations. They demonstrate understandings that, while texts invite particular meanings, alternative meanings are possible" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2005b, p 6).

expectations of such texts, and by the time and place in which the text is read or viewed.

AATE, 2006, p 5

At first reading, the observation that different people will respond differently to the same literary text, and in this sense there are multiple interpretations, seems reasonable. When teaching Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to year 12 students, some students could not understand why Macbeth felt guilty over killing Duncan as they argued that politics is about power and the end justifies the means. In relation to the episode from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, some students agreed with Angel that he had every right to reject Tess as she was not the woman he thought he had married. Notwithstanding that how one responds to a literary text can be highly personal, the reality, as suggested by Umberto Eco, is that some interpretations are closer to the truth than others and some responses are more faithful to the text. Not only are some interpretations factually wrong, Macbeth had Banquo murdered after Duncan's death and not before, but some interpretations run counter to the type of response the literary text seeks to elicit. Hardy portrays Angel as hypocritical and wrong in his actions and those readers who suggest that Angel was justified are guilty of misunderstanding what is written.

When reading Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, in which he argues one solution to the starvation and poverty suffered by the Irish during the famine was to fatten and sell young children as food, the initial response is one of horror and disgust at the idea of cannibalism. Students are also highly critical of Swift for suggesting such a barbaric solution. After reading and discussing the pamphlet, some students begin to see that Swift is being ironic and, instead of advocating killing and eating children, Swift is condemning the British for allowing such suffering to continue and for doing little, if anything, to remedy the problem. *A Modest Proposal* is clearly an example of satire and any student suggesting that Swift seriously intended children to be eaten has misread the text.

To say that how one interprets a text is influenced by "cultural expectations" also appears reasonable, but, once again, a closer analysis shows the observation to be both misleading and of little value. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* there is a moment in the novel where Huck is overwhelmed by guilt as a consequence of helping Jim, the escaped Negro slave, to flee south. For many living in the southern states at the time the book was written, the culture was one where slavery was accepted and those reading the novel, most likely, would have agreed with Huck that what he was doing in helping Jim was wrong. Such an interpretation cannot disguise the fact that the novel suggests otherwise and that Mark Twain, in describing Huck's dilemma the way he does, is suggesting that Huck is wrong to feel guilty and that Jim has every right to be free.

Instead of responding faithfully to a literary text, a critical literacy approach focuses on analysing texts as cultural artefacts and deconstructing them in terms of power relationships and the way texts are used by the more dominant forces in society to control others. As argued by the President of the Australian Capital Territory Australian Association for the Teaching of English:

To use a critical literacy lens, students would ask: Who is in the text? Who is missing? Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted? What are the intentions of the author/speaker? What does the author/speaker want the audience to think? What would an alternative text say? How can the audience use this information to promote equity?

Haren, 2005, p 2

One of the memorable moments in the American short story *Shane*, in which a gun fighter gives up his weapons and works on a small farm, is when the farmer and the gun fighter work together to dig out a tree stump. Seen through the eyes of a young boy watching, the two men try and outdo one another in a competition to see who is the strongest. After the two exhausted men finally dig out the stump, the farmer's wife brings out refreshments. In the context of the story, it is clear that the main interest in the episode is the competition and bonding between the two men and the impact the scene has on the young boy. A critical literacy approach ignores such an interpretation and, if based on a feminist perspective, would focus on the way the incident reinforces gender stereotyping as the mother spends most of her time in the kitchen while the two men work outside. Ignored is that such an interpretation has nothing to do with the story, as such, and more to do with modern concepts of gender equality and judging the text, written some years ago, from a contemporary world view. Deconstructing the text in terms of a feminist perspective has as much validity as condemning the farmer for destroying the environment by cutting down trees and cultivating the land.

The way Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is now taught provides a second example of the way literature is distorted to fit contemporary ideas about political correctness. The 17th Century English poem presents a lover's argument as to why he and his mistress should consummate their relationship. Two Australian academics, Cross and Marsh (1970, p 66), describe the poem as "one of the most celebrated in the language" and applaud the manner in which Marvell presents the case for seizing the moment and for the two lovers to embrace. While acknowledging the force of the poem, and the way it has provided "pleasure and inspiration to readers for hundreds of years" Mark Howie, the President of the NSW English Teachers' Association, criticises the poem for presenting "a view of the world that is at once partial and chauvinistic". In explaining how he teaches the poem to year 10 students, Howie also criticises the poem on the basis that countries in the industrialised, Western world have not done enough to support poorer countries in Africa:

My group of fifteen year olds found the seize the day theme to be particularly relevant to them at their stage in life. However, what became quickly obvious to them as they were concurrently following preparations for the Live8 concerts on television and the web, was that not everyone is free to seize the day. That such things as gender, age, nationality, economic circumstances, and even where we live determine our possibilities in life.

Howie, 2005, p 2

Not only is it bizarre to interpret a 17th Century poem in the light of today's debates about third world poverty, but there is the added problem that in using the description 'chauvinistic', Howie is guilty of misreading the poem.

In opposition to critical literacy, it is possible to argue a case for the pre-eminent position of literature. One of the defining characteristics of literature is that it deals with those existential and moral dilemmas that define what it is to be human. Emotions like love, despair, ambition, grief and joy are universal and, as suggested by Jung, there are symbols and archetypes that recur across cultures and across time. One only needs to read Greek tragedies like *Medea* and *Oedipus* to realise that, notwithstanding all the clichés about millennial change, human nature is constant.

Literature, unlike a computer manual, also uses language in a unique way. Reading involves what Coleridge termed a “willing suspension of disbelief” as the reader enters an imaginative world that has the power to shock, to awe and speak to one’s inner self. The American academic, Louise Rosenblatt, makes a similar point about the unique quality of literature when she differentiates between what she terms an ‘efferent’ and an ‘aesthetic’ response. When assembling furniture, reading an IKEA manual is totally different to what is required when reading, say, T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The first is concerned with reading in its most literal guise and the purpose of reading is to understand information as quickly and easily as possible. With an aesthetic response, on the other hand, we see language being used in a poetic sense as the reader is called on to respond in an imaginative way and the purpose of reading is generally not immediately practical or utilitarian.

Especially in relation to primary school children, as noted by the American psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim (1978, p 10), not only are classic myths, legends, fables and stories an essential part of our cultural heritage, but such works, epitomised by fairy tales, also speak in a profoundly important way to the young child’s need for emotional, psychological and spiritual well being:

The deep inner conflict originating in our primitive drives and our violent emotions are all denied in much of modern children’s literature, and so the child is not helped in coping with them ... The fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas seriously and addresses itself directly to them.

As argued by the late S.L. Goldberg, there is also the point that no amount of cant about readers as ‘meaning makers’ and texts as ‘socio-cultural constructions’ can disguise the fact that literature is unique in the way it evokes and deals with those essential qualities that define us as human. Goldberg (1986, p 18) argues:

... people are more likely than not to go on being interested in people – as much as they are in abstract theories and ideologies, or impersonal forces, or structural systems, or historical information, or even the play of signifiers. So it is more likely than not, I’d say, that people will go on valuing those writings that they judge best help them to realize what the world is and what people are, and to live with both as realistically and as fully as they can.

The irony is that while advocates of critical literacy attack more traditional approaches to teaching literature as being dry and empty, the critical literacy approach, in forcing students to respond to literature according to ‘theory’, is guilty of making students parrot half digested ideas about Marxism, feminism, gender and, as a

result, much of the joy and appreciation of literature is lost. As noted by the Australian author Sophie Masson⁴⁶, based on the experience of her sons and her visits to schools, students very quickly learn what hoops they have to jump through if they are to succeed:

In my experience, the really bright kids who love literature simply mouth the stuff they have to in order to pass exams, and rebelliously, in their own minds, cleave to their own ideas. And they avoid English at university like the plague. Those who will go along with any orthodoxy – and that's been so at any age and time – because literature is simply a way to getting good marks and going to uni, will do just what is required of them and reproduce the Mickey Mouse cut-rate Derrida and Foucault and McLuhan without a care in the world. And the kids to whom literature might speak – if character and story were emphasised and not values – the kids who are not academically inclined or gifted necessarily but who might well respond to books if they were presented in an interesting way, the kids who more and more are staying on in Year 12 – well, those kids are all at sea. They find English both boring and hard. They do not understand theory and they don't give a damn about it. And so an opportunity is lost.

Masson, 2005

1.4 Australian Education Union

... we have succeeded in influencing curriculum development in schools, education departments and universities. The conservatives have a lot of work to do to undo the progressive curriculum.

Byrne, 2005b, p 4

As a teacher union representing some 164,642⁴⁷ government school members around Australia, it is only natural that the Australian Education Union (AEU) defends and champions the rights of its members. Given the union's affiliation with the Australian Council of Trade Unions and similar state based union organisations, it is also understandable that the AEU consistently campaigns to have Labor governments elected, both at the state and national level⁴⁸. Where there is cause for concern, illustrated by the above quotation taken from a speech by Pat Byrne, is when the teacher union seeks to influence the school curriculum; especially, when dealing with sensitive issues such as the purpose of education and what should be taught in the classroom.

An additional reason for concern is the way those close to the union, instead of advocating a balanced and impartial approach to education, clearly identify their allegiance to the cultural-left. Pat Byrne bemoans the fact that conservative

⁴⁶ The thread where Sophie Masson details her criticisms of the way 'theory' has subverted 12 English can be found at: <http://www.clubtrotppo.com.au/2005/02/15/english-at-school/#more-1314>

⁴⁷ The Australian Education Union was established in 1995 and the membership numbers quoted are based on 2005 figures.

⁴⁸ At the 1995 national teacher unions' conference, the then federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Simon Crean, was quoted as saying: "In 1993 the support of the unions was crucial to the ALP's return to Government" (Painter, 1995).

governments are winning elections and identifies herself as being on the side of the progressives:

This is not a good time to be progressive in Australia; or for that matter anywhere else in the world! Progressives everywhere are finding themselves in increasingly conservative environments – we need look no further than the election results here and in the US and to a slightly lesser extent in Britain. In Europe, even countries traditionally seen as socially progressive are exhibiting signs of drifting to the right.

Byrne, 2005a, p 1

The fear held by those on the left that they might be losing the culture wars is also argued in an article in the Australian Education Union's journal, *Professional Voice*. Once again, the Howard Government is condemned as immoral and deceitful and the author, Jan Schapper, leaves the reader in no doubt as to which side of the political fence schools and teachers should place themselves:

That there is controversy is cause for hope. For, in the presence of controversy, is the raising of other voices in opposition. The moral values of the Right, while dominant, have not yet erased or silenced the morality of those of us who despair at the Right's dominance. It is thus incumbent upon us to assert our morality and to locate our work within an ethical framework that makes sense to schools and our community.

Schapper, 2004/2005

One example of teacher union interference in the classroom relates to the Howard Government's decision to commit Australian forces to the invasion of Iraq. In a media release dated 17 January, 2003 the union argues that there is "absolutely no justification" for the invasion and that the Howard Government, as a result of terrorists attacks such as September 11 and the Bali bombing, is guilty of promoting "militarism and xenophobia". In a second media release, dated 20 March, 2003, the Australian Education Union argues against what it terms the "illegal invasion of Iraq" and teachers are urged to discuss the outbreak of war in the classroom and to "support students who take anti-war stance" and to "encourage participation in peaceful protests with the support and involvement of other family members". Regardless of whether the invasion was justified or not, most parents would most likely agree that it is wrong for teachers to present such a partisan view and that politics should be kept out of the classroom.

A further example of the union attempting to influence what happens in the classroom relates to its policy on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (GLBT). In relation to classroom, the union argues that curriculum must:

... be written in non-heterosexist language. Sexuality should be included in all curriculum relating to health and personal development. Homosexuality and bisexuality need to be normalised and materials need to be developed which will help combat homophobia. Such material must be inclusive and educate all students to value diversity.

Australian Education Union, 2003a, p 4

Once again, in protecting members' rights, it is acceptable that the union fights to ensure that members are not unfairly discriminated against because of their sexuality. To argue, though, when dealing with GLBT issues in the school curriculum that such treatment "should aim to be positive in its approach" ignores the fact that many parents would consider such practices as unacceptable and argue that such sensitive matters are best dealt with in the context of the family.

As might be expected, given that the AEU is a strong advocate of the culture wars, it is also the case that in areas like racism, reconciliation and refugees, the union adopts a progressive, new-age approach. According the union's *Policy on Combatting Racism*, Australia's legal system is "inherently racist in so much as its prime purpose is to serve the needs of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture" (AEU, 1999). One wonders if our legal system is so racist how the High Court arrived at its decision over Indigenous land rights; a decision that rejected *terra nullius* and recognised that Aboriginal and other Indigenous groups have the right to claim ownership over their land. While the union's argument that racism is wrong, and that the school curriculum should be designed to counter racist attitudes, is just, once again, it is obvious that the union's policy dictates a one sided view of such matters.

Not only does the union argue that racism is: "still widely practised throughout Australian society", ignoring the argument that Australian society is open and tolerant, but the paper on racism argues that making Indigenous Australians study the values and culture of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture is racist. In opposition to learning about Australia's mainstream society, schools are told that Indigenous Australians should be taught: "according to the values of their own culture". Ignored is the argument by some Aboriginal activists, to be fully empowered, that Indigenous Australians must learn standard English and how Australia's political and legal system works if they are to be in a position to shape and control their own destiny.

Given the union's views, it should be no surprise that the Australian Education Union's paper *Policy on Reconciliation*, once again, attacks the Howard Government and adopts what Geoffrey Blainey terms a black armband view of Australian history. European colonisation is described as an "invasion" and the policy of early governments presented as "genocide". While an argument can be put, for all their supposed faults, that early Christian and missionary schools achieved some benefits, especially in isolated, outback Indigenous communities, the union paper criticises such work and states:

The AEU formally apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for the role that educators and schools had in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities and their subsequent mistreatment.

Australian Education Union, 1998

In relation to the schools and what happens in the classroom, the union argues that education departments around Australia should: "include Reconciliation and information from "the Bringing Them Home" report on the Stolen Generations into the Curriculum and to develop curriculum support materials". Once again, there is no recognition that the issues surrounding reconciliation might be contentious or debatable and that students deserve a more balanced presentation.

One further example of the union's tendency to adopt a Progressive, new-age stance on cultural issues relates to gender and the paper *Policy on Gender Equity* (AEU, 2003b). The 2002 Commonwealth Parliament report *Boys Getting it right* suggests that attempts during the 1980s and 1990s to positively discriminate in favour of girls, while largely successful, failed to satisfactorily meet the needs of boys:

Girls' education strategies and programs have, as a by-product of their original purpose assisted girls through the social and economic changes of the last 20 years. In comparison, over this period, little has been done to help boys understand and negotiate the same changes.

Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, p xviii

The Commonwealth Report, as recommendation number 1, suggests that the principal document informing gender policy, entitled *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, is partly to blame for the imbalance and that it should be rewritten. Not only does the AEU policy question the argument that girls outperform boys in areas like year 12 results, but the union also endorses and supports *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, arguing that the document is "the key foundation upon which to build future policy development". Existing relations between the sexes, and how gender is conceived and enacted in schools and the wider society, are described as a form of injustice. Whether the gendered nature of education and paid/unpaid work, the power and economic imbalances between men and women or what the union sees as destructive and oppressive forms of masculinity and femininity, the argument is that schools have a central role to play in advancing the feminist cause.

Similar to the Australian Curriculum Studies Association and the Australian Council of Deans of Education, the AEU argues that Australia is a "class-based society that is diverse and characterised by inequality and social conflict" (AEU, 1993, p 4). The more conservative model of schooling is attacked as elitist and socially unjust and the role of education is defined as producing "more equal educational outcomes by social group and to assist in overcoming inequalities between groups" (AEU, 1993, p 4).

For most of the post Second World War period, Australian education has been based on the concept of equality of opportunity; no matter what a student's socio-economic background, ethnicity or religion, all are entitled to the same standard of education. Those from the cultural-left argue that equality of opportunity is not enough and that there must be positive discrimination in favour of so-called victim groups, such as girls, non-English speaking migrants and students from a working class background.

While some 40% of Australian students now attend years 11 and 12 in non-government schools, in part, because such schools achieve strong academic results, the union also argues that traditional academic subjects promote a socially unjust, elitist and conservative view of the curriculum:

Traditional academic subjects have been criticised for their semi-artificial separation from each other; for social and cultural biases (for example through their language of discourse and through the exclusion of information about women and aboriginal people); for concealing debates

about values while claiming absolute objectivity; and for claiming a scientific rigour which they do not really possess. As a whole, academic subjects as conventionally presented contain markedly conservative social and political assumptions.

Australian Education Union, 1993, p 10

Given the union's anti-elitist stance it should not be a surprise that the teacher union is also a critic of non-government schools. As outlined in a number of curriculum policy documents⁴⁹ written during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the union argues that non-government schools (private schools) are the preserve of the "social elite" and unfairly monopolise academic education and entry to high status professions such as medicine and law. Ignored is the success of selective high schools in year 12 examinations, in particular, in New South Wales, and the fact that the non-government sector, especially Catholic schools, are made of many parents from middle Australia. Similar to the argument put by the Labor federal politician, Craig Emerson, in *Vital Signs, Vibrant Society*, the teacher union argues that all schools must become public schools and, thereby, controlled by the state.

While many parents value the independence of non-government schools, the union's policy is to impose increased government regulation in areas like curriculum, educational outcomes, salaries and record keeping and any schools unable to conform to the new regulatory regime would be denied public funding. Such is the union's dislike of non-government schools, for much of the 1990s, that it also argued that governments should stop funding non-government schools as "the resource efforts of Governments should be wholly devoted to the public systems which are open to all" (AEU, 1993, p 5). More recently, leading up to and during the 2004 federal election, the Australian Education Union mounted a concerted campaign, involving \$1.5 million dollars and targeting some 28 marginal seats, against the Howard Government school's policy.

⁴⁹See *Curriculum Policy* (AEU, 1986, 1988 and 1993).