

Book Review

Ronald G. Sultana

Kenneth Wain: *The Maltese National Curriculum: A Critical Evaluation*, Mireva Publications, 1991, Monographs in Education Series, No. 1. xii + 124 pp., Lm2.50

There is hardly an area which falls within the experience of so many people and affects their lives to such an extent as schooling does. Because of this, one would be justified to expect that educational reform and innovations would attract the attention and reaction of an overwhelming majority of people.

And yet in the space of two years we have seen the publication of three National Minimum Curricula, one for the primary, another for the secondary and a third for the tertiary level, without much of a response on the part of teachers, parents, students, or the community generally.

It is this rather disquieting silence over the educational developments of crucial importance that has driven Professor Kenneth Wain to write and publish the monograph under review. It is the first in what promises to be a controversial and timely series of publications, authored by different educational theorists and under Wain's general editorship, aimed at critically appraising the Maltese educational system and pointing towards alternative practice.

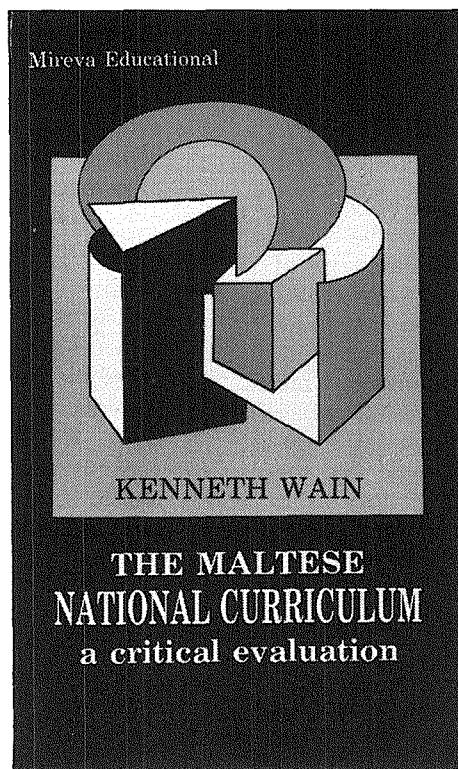
Wain makes a number of important points about education and the schooling system in Malta, but it would probably be correct to say that his major concern is over the process of educational innovation and reform (or pseudo-reform) as undertaken by the State, with the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) being one case in point.

He argues that while in a variety of sites in the State the pre-election promise of dialogue and participation has, to some extent, been kept, it has been reduced to rhetoric in matters concerning education. In the latter case, teachers, parents and students have been treated in the paternalistic manner reminiscent of hierarchical colonial government, with curricula and syllabi being handed to the people from above.

This leadership style implies, of course, that the State, through the Ministry and Department of Education, knows the best interests of the different individuals and groups it represents. Indeed, Wain argues that the NMC represents a further intrusion by the State into the private domain.

Despite rhetoric of decentralisation the State bureaucracy has successfully strangled the very possibility of initiative and creative response to individual and community needs in different school communities. The School Councils as set up by the present government are in fact little more than fund-raising bodies, for instance. Moreover, through the publication of the NMC the State has now the legal means to extend its bureaucratic control on private schools.

Wain is of course alert to the practical difficulties associated with participative democracies. He **does** ask those awkward questions that in fact require answers which are not only ethically but also politically articulate. Are teachers to be trusted with the power of developing their own code of ethics, their own syllabi and curricula, their own pedagogical approaches? Does the general public, and do parents and students more specifically, know enough about education to be invited to participate actively in the



decision-making policies of the State?

While there are no easy formula answers to such questions, Wain argues that the solution adopted by the State is certainly not the correct one, and this for a number of reasons. He defends the teachers' and publics' presumed incompetence by arguing that one counters that state by providing the knowledge and skills necessary to develop an active, informed citizenry.

Simply dishing out ready-made answers in a patriarchal "I know what's good for you" fashion merely encourages ignorance, passivity and the reinforcement of a process incompatible with democracy: the construction of citizens as consumers. These consumers, argues Wain, have now even lost the only right they have: the option to go elsewhere if what the State has to offer is unattractive or unacceptable.

But this is only part of the problem. Wain tears into the NMC content to show the problems, contradictions and limitations which plague it. There is, it turns out, no explicit philosophy or rationale to inform the content of the Primary Curriculum.

Despite gimmicky progressive elements, it is not only out of tune with contemporary educational theory and practice, but is riven with contradictions. It claims to have organised learning in a radically different manner, but in fact maintains the hallmarks of an outdated and inadequate primary education, i.e. teacher-centred teaching organised around fragmented subject disciplines directed towards assessment by examinations so that ultimately, the concern is once again not the student, but the certified product.

Education becomes yet again in this tired, uninspired curriculum, a matter of goals to be achieved rather than a process where the focus is on individuals who seek growth and self-actualisation, and where the teacher's complex job is to facilitate that development.

What is even more dangerous is that these pre-determined goals are defined by the State: hence, as in the most totalitarian of States, we find the desire for the subjugation of the individual and the original to the communal and the conventional. What gives Wain some peace of mind is his knowledge that teachers will simply ignore the NMC's ambitions for social engineering, privately resisting what they have publicly failed to contest.

The Secondary Curriculum fares little better under Wain's critical dissection, even though its general rationale is more coherent and less contradictory than the one for the primary level. All in all, however, it suffers from the same lack of inspiration and vision. We find the same teacher-centred, subject-oriented approach to learning, the same utilitarian emphasis (in this context highlighted with a vengeance since students are presumed to be closer to their transition from school to work), and the same politically dangerous insistence on pre-established goals.

Wain does well to question the political aims of a curriculum in a democracy, which in the context of the NMC are identified with the task of creating "an increasingly higher level of consensus". He finds unacceptable the NMC authors' (author's) half-hearted criticism of tripartism which has been condemned as unjust, illegal even, in most if not all Western educational systems.

The issue **is** addressed by the NMC, but any resolution of the tensions which gather around this topic of vital importance is avoided. Having condemned/banned neither streaming nor tripartism in principle, it of course fails to do so in policy. And the new NMC waters itself down to even more of the same, a pseudo-reform which simply gives the impression that the government is doing something.

Wain does not stop at critique, often the privilege of some academics who adopt an oppositional stance to practically anything without coming up with any positive alternatives. Therefore, having developed a critique in Parts I and II of the monograph, Wain provides us with his own version of what educational practice should be like in Malta.

In contrast to the NMC documents, he states his political values clearly and coherently, claiming that education cannot be divorced from the macro-context in which it operates. He argues from what could be called a "liberal progressive" framework, very much in the Deweyian tradition, where the emphasis is on an education for democracy.

In effect, what Wain does in the third part of his monograph is to take the rhetoric of the State and push it to its only logical conclusion by asking "What would education really look like if we had to take the promises of the State seriously?" Then

follows his version of education which places the individual at the centre of schooling, where teachers mobilise their personal and material resources in order to facilitate the growth and self-actualisation of the young.

Learning would be transformed from a boring, joyless grind in a cruel system intent on selection and exclusion into an exciting, holistic and intrinsically motivating series of problem-solving activities. Students would not be involved in an alienating consumption of knowledge which has no relevance to their experiential frameworks but which is momentarily frozen and reproduced in exams. Rather students would actively produce knowledge, drawing in an organic manner on different "subjects" and bringing this to bear on particular issues in order to gain insight and understanding.

As Wain takes pains to point out, this is no utopic dream. Such strategies have a practical relevance for they are the most suitable in preparing our present generation for a future world marked by impermanence. The accelerated change of modernisation requires a vocational and political response. The former refers to an industrial scenario which prefers a flexible and adaptable worker to one who is narrowly schooled and skilled.

Modern industry - if we are truly heading to a "high-tech" market - changes so rapidly that the most important skill would be "learning how to learn". Modernisation brings with it political dilemmas as well - and Wain argues for an education which faces up to these challenges, making a case for political and human rights education as an integral part of the curriculum. For how else could Malta have an active citizenry, knowledgeable and virtuous enough to resist the demon of materialist ego-centrism that modernism trails in its wake? How else could one draw citizens into the communal effort of active participation and self-determination?

Wain's notion of education is, needless to say, infinitely more inspiring than what the State has presented us with. His proposal is coherent, humane, politically informed, and concerned not only with goals and ends but with principles,

processes and values. He writes forcefully: indeed his criticism is stinging, as when he argues that nothing new can be expected from bureaucrats whose very *raison d'être* is the safeguarding of their own vested interests in the maintenance of the status quo. It is as if Wain chooses to write provocatively, anxious lest his document be greeted with the worst insult a community could inflict on a writer: silence.

There are, of course, a number of places where I do not agree with Wain. His liberal politics and emphasis on individual rights tend to obscure the stratification of power in Malta, and the subordinate position in that structure of groups identified by their class and gender. The progressive, child-centred pedagogy he advocates unproblematically needs to be considered in the light of recent evidence which suggests that such practice favours the cultural habitus of the new middle class and is quite alien to that of the manual working classes.

Wain also highlights the positive side of private schools, giving little attention to their role in reinforcing privilege from one generation to the next. I am also, I must admit, much less optimistic than Wain is in his generous appraisal of teachers as workers who care, who keep themselves informed, and who, in the privacy of their classroom if not in public fora, in dialogical or confrontational manner, contest the incompetence of the State.

Many teachers as an occupational group have been co-opted by the State - or more exactly, by the government - whose spurious bestowal of professional status and raising of salaries has ensured the tacit compliance of individual "professionals" and some would argue, of the union which represents them.

But such differences in analysis and interpretations are possible because Wain's text practises what it preaches: it invites response and stimulates reaction. In brief, it achieves that goal so dear to a democracy but so absent from the NMC: it keeps the conversation going. To itself and to its public, the State has a lot to answer for for the betrayal of "dialogue" and "participation".