Article begins on following page.

Please note:

'Death by a Thousand Cuts': the failings of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum (2000-2006): the political dynamics

G.W. Rodwell

Charles Darwin University

In 2000, Paula Wriedt, the Tasmanian Minister for Education, gave instructions for her department to begin the development of a K to 10 statewide curriculum, soon to become known as the Essential Learnings Framework, or simply, ELs. The curriculum was an integrated one, doing away with traditional subjects, or disciplines, such as mathematics, science, English and history, and replacing these with an integrated, enquiry-based curriculum underpinned by constructivist pedagogy. This was the first attempt in Tasmania at a statewide K to 10 curriculum, and the first attempt at major system-wide curriculum change for nearly twenty years.

Essentially, ELs was a political, as much as an educational initiative. Following six years of intensely public outrage and hostile public discourse, its demise closely followed the failed political fortunes of its political architect – Paula Wriedt. The ELs saga had far reaching implications, going beyond simply the curriculum content and pedagogy for Tasmanian schools.

Introduction

At the end of 2007, the outgoing Australian Education Union – Tasmanian Branch (AEU) president, Jean Walker, used the occasion of the election of the new president to assess her own past four years in the position. She nominated the controversy surrounding the former Tasmanian Essential Learnings (ELs) curriculum as one of the most difficult periods of her time in office. Indeed, her presidency was marked by the ELs imbroglio, a state election, the demise of Paula Wriedt as Minister for Education, and, ostensibly, the end of the ELs curriculum initiative. In an interview in *The Mercury*, Hobart's daily newspaper, Walker declared that for her, the ELs rollout was 'very taxing … a long and difficult and challenging process'. Concluding her interview with

The Mercury, Walker criticised what she said was 'more hands-on political interference in schools than ever before, with ministers' decisions, sometimes more about their own career paths than what is best for schools'.[1] Clearly, there were strong political imperatives in the ELs change effort. Indeed, ELs was as much a political initiative as it was an educational initiative. This paper is concerned with unravelling the political dynamics which underpinned the demise of ELs.

Contextual Background

In 2005, John Graham, research officer with the Victorian Branch of the AEU, perhaps with an eye to the public outrage growing in Tasmania over the ELs curriculum, wrote to his members on the topic of curriculum change. The union saw essential learnings as 'a "movement", for that is what it appeared to be', having spread around the country over the past few years.[2] Tasmania, South Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland had implemented variations of essential learnings'. Graham's paper showed that Tasmania's ELs curriculum was the most radical of the nation's essential learnings curricula.

As with other essential learnings curricula, the ELs curriculum was based on the much-troubled constructivist pedagogy. Constructivist teaching (pedagogy) as a theory or practice has only received attention for approximately a decade. Authors such as Richardson have focussed on the many vexed issues associated with constructivist pedagogy.[3] A constructivist classroom seeks to provide students with opportunities to develop deep understandings of the material, internalize it, understand the nature of knowledge development, and develop complex cognitive maps that connect together bodies of knowledge and understanding that entails considerable challenges for teachers, and consequently also for curriculum policy planners. The pedagogy eschews a discipline-based curriculum. However, that is not a primary concern in this paper.

By 2006, the year that the ELs curriculum was discontinued in favour of a more conservative approach, nationally, essential learnings was far from being regarded as radical. This was despite the difficulties associated with integrated curricula noted by some researchers.[4] Certainly, internationally, there were lessons here for the ELs curriculum planners and the government in Hobart. For example, the fate of curriculum 'reform' in Quebec offered a lesson for the Tasmanian planners on the fate of outcomes-based education (OBE) and constructivist-inspired curricula. Henchey described the developments during their early phases in that province. *Inter alia*, he reported that

this reformist, integrated curriculum, with its emphasis on communication technologies, embraced a 'rethinking of the focus and essential content of various subject areas' with an 'emphasis on cross-curricular and interdisciplinary learning'. Especially, it embodied 'new approaches to assessment and reporting'.[5] What was the fate of these developments? In a history that parallels that of ELs, CBC News announced on 1 June 2007 that 'after years of complaints from parents and teachers … Quebec has backed away from an unpopular curriculum'.[6] These developments occurred at the same time as the demise of ELs.

Such is the popular feeling against the loss of traditional subjects, and the consequent introduction of constructivist-inspired, integrated curricula that in some countries curriculum authorities are now supported by legislation which safeguards traditional school subject disciplines. For example, in the United Kingdom the national curriculum enshrines the traditional subject disciplines, and consequently guards against their disappearance through integrated curricula.[7] The history of ELs in Tasmania is remarkably similar to mandated curriculum change in Quebec and also the introduction of OBE in Western Australia (WA).

In Australia during the early twenty-first century, essential learnings curricula was fast becoming mainstream in schools, with only New South Wales and WA not implementing some form of essential learnings. When questions are asked about why ELs was brought to an end in Tasmania, the answers may not always be associated with the nature of the ELs curriculum, but rather with the policy and the management of its implementation, underpinned by the political dynamics present in Tasmania at the time. Readers may be aware of some sharp similarities between the Queensland form of essential learnings and that in Tasmania. As with Queensland, the essential learnings, rather than the Key Learning Areas (KLAs), were the curriculum organisers on which ELs was based. In Queensland, however, schools were able to choose whether or not they would 'come on board' with essential learnings. In Tasmania that was not possible, because ELs was made mandatory for all state schools from Years K to10.

In the context of what occurred in Quebec and Tasmania, one should also note what happened in WA with respect to OBE. Berlach and O'Neill have reminded readers that 'epistemic imperatives lie at the heart of any [curriculum] change', and unless these are well considered

at the planning stage the whole curriculum change effort is likely to break down at the school level.[8] So when the WA Curriculum Council began to expand its previous K to 10 OBE-based curriculum into the high-stakes years of schooling – Years 11 and 12 – strong opposition emerged, and the OBE-based curriculum was rejected. Berlach and O'Neill argue that a base cause for the failure of OBE was because 'epistemic imperatives' were not sorted out at the planning stage: put simply, in schools and in the community there was little agreement or common understanding about essential terminology embodied in the curriculum. Berlach and O'Neill also claim this same failure to adhere to 'epistemic imperatives' at the curriculum planning stage led to the demise of similar curriculum initiatives in New Zealand, South Africa and the USA.[9]

The ELs Imbroglio in Tasmanian

Before examining the political interference involved in ELs referred to by Walker, it is necessary first to note the significance of the ELs curriculum controversy in Tasmania.[10] The state has a population of around a half million people and a rich and diverse history of educational change during the past century.[11] Nevertheless, Tasmanians rejected the ELs initiative at the 2006 state election. The re-elected Lennon Labor Government responded to the Minister of Education's vastly reduced vote in the southern Tasmanian seat of Franklin by replacing her in the portfolio with David Bartlett. ELs continued in schools for several months, before Bartlett announced its end. Not since the sacking of the Tasmanian Director of Education, W.L. Neale, in 1909, had Tasmanian teachers and the general public responded with such vitriol against an educational initiative.[12] As with Neale's sacking, the ELs initiative became highly politicised, dividing Tasmanian society into two distinct camps – those who supported it and those who thought it had a destructive influence on children's learning and their future prospects.

During 2005-06, the Tasmanian media was awash with stories about ELs. Indeed, *The Mercury* had a total of 68 lead stories on ELs, by far the majority of them hostile to the revised curriculum. During the lead up to the March 2006 state elections many Tasmanians voiced their opinions on the school curriculum. Ross Butler was a Hobart taxi driver during 2005-06, and he attests that many people who got into his cab during those years had strong views on the curriculum. Butler had been a principal at Glenorchy's Cosgrove High School and President of the Tasmanian Teachers' Federation (the AEU predecessor). In 2008, he

was elected Labor member for the House of Assembly for the Franklin electorate on a recount following the retirement of Premier Paul Lennon in May 2008.[13]

ELs was born as part of the quest for the maintenance of political power; its eventual demise was through the democratically expressed will of the people. The political causes of its demise – its essential failings – are the main focus of this paper.

Why did ELs prove a failure? In respect to causation in history, Tosh claims that 'the only uncontroversial generalization which can be made about causation in history is that it is always multiple and many-layered'. Moreover, any analysis should embrace 'situational or background causes and direct or immediate causes, and the complexity [arising] from the manner in which different areas of human experience constantly obtrude on one another'.[14]

Obviously, a direct cause of the demise of ELs was Wriedt's poor result in the 2006 'ELs' election, which was marked by sustained negative media coverage. The result was interpreted as a voter backlash against ELs. But there were many other underlying causes in the demise of the curriculum.

The story begins with an examination of the Cresap 'reforms' of the early 1990s, wherein the Department of Education's curriculum expertise was 'gutted'. What followed was a decade of wilderness and wasteland in respect to system-wide curriculum development and implementation. Berlach and O'Neill refer to 'epistemic imperative' prior to any curriculum change effort. Here, they refer to 'the construction of formal models of the processes – perceptual, intellectual and linguistic – by which knowledge and understanding are achieved and communicated'[15] There is no evidence that this, or, indeed, any situational analysis was undertaken by the Department of Education prior to, or during the early years of the development and implementation of ELs. Given the paucity of system-wide curriculum expertise in the department at the time, this is not surprising. Consequently, when the ELs rollout began to experience difficulties, as more and more schools were included, there was considerable confusion over language and concepts. This situation was made worse by the introduction in 2005 on a statewide basis of the computerised Student Assessment and Reporting Information System (SARIS) as a mandatory assessment and reporting tool.

Of course, this simply begs the question of how this was allowed to occur. Herein lies the main focus of this paper: an examination of the

political factors underpinning the demise of ELs. In the 1990s the Tasmanian bureaucracy, along with other state governments, became increasingly politicised. However, the Tasmanian government bureaucracy was placed under exceptional pressure with the passing of the *Parliamentary Reform Act 1998* (Tas.) which reduced the size of parliament. As a consequence ministerial portfolios and government departments were increased in size. *Inter alia*, this resulted in policy being presented to the minister as a *fait accompli.*

Not surprisingly, as teachers, parents, employers and community members struggled to comprehend the concepts involved in ELs and the language being used, the Tasmanian media, especially *The Mercury*, began to portray ELs in very negative terms. At the same time Opposition politicians and disaffected community members used this negative portrayal in the media to enhance their own political agendas.

This paper places considerable importance on the use of the media as a primary source, but the author is mindful of authors such as Galgano, Arndt and Hyser who have alerted researchers to the need for caution in the use of newspapers, because they have 'some of the characteristics of a secondary source'. However, one of the values of newspapers is that they have a particular 'use to historians interested in examining language as a means to recover meaning'.[16] Consequently, this paper highlights the way in which *The Mercury*, in a political act used language to construct and maintain a public discourse that cast ELs in a particularly negative light.

The Politicization of the Tasmanian Department of Education

The politicization of government educational bureaucracies has long captured the attention of curriculum researchers. For example, Lawton wrote about this is in Thatcher's United Kingdom.[17] While the bureaucratic setting and the roles are different in respect to the issue of the politicization of the curriculum and the impact of this process on schools, the ELs curriculum initiative is remarkably similar to that described by Lawton. To understand the full nature of the changes in the Tasmanian Department of Education, it is necessary to go back to the early 1980s in order to examine briefly how the department came to be so heavily politicized.

In 1982, Tasmanian Liberal Leader, Robin Gray, was elected to office on a platform of state development and job creation. During the early years of the Gray Government, the Labor opposition was in disarray,

split between pro-development supporters and environmentalists. During this period, Dr Bob Brown led the Tasmanian Greens to political prominence. With the Greens now a significant political force in Tasmanian politics, in 1989 Gray lost the state election by one seat. Holding five seats in the then 35-seat Legislative Assembly, the Greens formed an unlikely alliance with Michael Field's Labor Party.[18]

The Gray Government had instigated major changes to Tasmanian state education, and accountability became a touchstone for educational administrators. The drive towards accountability, the corporatization of many aspects of Tasmanian public education and the accompanying rise of the 'New Right', were accompanied by the politicization of the managerial levels of the Department of Education.[19] At this point the notion of 'politicization' needs some analysis.

Parker contends that politicization is an imprecise concept, and needs to be carefully defined.[20] In the Australian context, the most comprehensive discussion is that by Weller[21] who claims politicization is the opposite of political neutrality. There are two aspects of the notion of politicization that can contradict the notion of neutrality: the first is the use of the public service for party political purposes. This is in contrast to the principle of neutrality which stipulates that public servants should not be used for party political purposes. There has been no evidence of this within the Tasmanian Department of Education. The second aspect of the notion of politicization concerns the appointment, promotion and tenure of public servants through party political influence. This contrasts with the principle of neutrality that prescribes that appointments, promotion and tenure should be independent of party political influence.

Writing in 1989, Weller found evidence of only a few partisan appointments at the secretary level by the Hawke-led Commonwealth Labor Government in Canberra. Writing two years after the Howard-led Coalition victory over the Keating Labor Government, Mulgan concluded that the process of politicization of the Australian Public Service (APS), 'in the sense of appointments to suit the preferences of the government of the day has been gradually increasing over recent decades'. Moreover, 'the process has been given added impetus by the growing insecurity of tenure among secretaries, and by the sometimes uncritical adoption of private sector management models'.[22] No such studies exist for the Tasmanian public service. It is necessary to refer to national studies to illustrate the politicization of the public service.

The Tasmanian political landscape underwent massive changes in 1998 when Tasmanians elected their first majority Labor government since 1972.[23] The reduction in size of parliament was to be a major contributing factor to the politicization of the Department of Education.

Since 1989, both of Tasmania's major political parties had attempted to govern with Green support (Michael Field's Labor Government in 1989-92 and Tony Rundle's Liberal Government in 1996-98). In both instances, it was an impossible alliance; both the Liberals and Labor agreed that desperate measures were needed to reduce the perceived undue and disruptive influence of the Greens. Consequently, in late July 1998, the two parties combined against the Greens to support legislation to reduce the House of Assembly from 35 members to 25 members, and the Legislative Council from 19 to 15 members. In the Hare-Clark system, used for the election of the House of Assembly, the quota for election was, thus, increased from 12.5 per cent to 16.7 per cent, a vote that the Greens were not likely to achieve. The same quota also precluded some sitting members from the two major parties from being elected.[24]

By mid-1998, Labor and the Liberals were in different political shape. Tony Rundle's Liberal Government was said to be well behind in the polls. Indeed, in May there had been rumors of a Liberal leadership spill, and three ministers decided not to re-contest their seats, always a bad sign for any political party. By contrast, Labor's chances of election to office seemed much more favourable than at any time since its 1979 victory under Doug Lowe. Its vote had been creeping upwards during the 1990s, and there had been an amicable leadership change from Michael Field to Jim Bacon.[25] At the same time, the politicization of government bureaucracies continued in Tasmania, a process accentuated by the lack of public scrutiny of government policy brought about by the reduction in size of the House of Assembly.[26]

'There is no fishbowl in Australian politics as small as the Tasmanian one'

There was much discussion about the reduced size of the parliament in Tasmania, which was accentuated with the demise of Wriedt in August 2008. Her political fortunes took 'a nose dive' following the 'ELs' election of 2006. Confronted with a personal crisis concerning her relationship with her government motor vehicle driver, during early August 2008, Wriedt stood down from her portfolio of Economic

Development and Tourism. *The Mercury* reported that her 'political future [was] in doubt'.[27]

Michael Stedman in *The Mercury* reported on Richard Herr's assessement of a possible cause of Wriedt's condition. Herr had claimed that ministers were under 'immense pressure', and open to constant public gaze. Herr suggested that it was 'very hard to live in a fishbowl, and there is no fishbowl in Australian politics as small as the Tasmanian one'. In Tasmania, there were 'seven ministers effectively trying to do the work of twice that number in South Australia' but the pressures were 'largely the same'.[28]

Herr was a political scientist at the University of Tasmania who had long been a critic of reducing the size of parliament. He claimed that 'the creation of super-departments has shifted decision-making downward from the cabinet into senior executive levels of the bureaucracy … disparate interests that once would have been brought to cabinet by separate ministers [were] now settled within a department and presented to the minister as a *fait accompli*'.[29]

Public concern about the influence of Tasmania's small parliament on sound governance had been a concern for a number of years. For example, on the eve of the 2006 'ELs' election, Airlie Ward, from the ABC *Stateline* television program, reminded Tasmanians that they were 'heading into an election year', and that 'the smaller parliament was designed to hinder the election of the Greens and assure majority government'. Then she put these questions to her panel and viewers: 'Does the smaller parliament work effectively? Has it been good for democracy? Or, has it led to unelected public servants doing the work of MPs?'[30]

On the *Stateline* television panel that night was Wayne Crawford, a long-time Tasmanian political commentator. He began by asserting that the main consequence of the reduced size of the Tasmanian parliament had been a diminished opposition to the government, because the Liberals and the Greens were also opposing each other. Crawford suggested that under the existing arrangements 'there was just not the critical mass of members to draw on now for all sorts of things, including cabinet, including committees'. Moreover, now there was virtually 'no backbench on the Government side to speak of, which means that if cabinet makes a decision, cabinet, plus the Government leader, plus the parliamentary secretary have a majority in the Caucus'. Consequently, cabinet decisions could be 'rolled through the Caucus without any dissent'. This meant that cabinet was really 'running the

parliament without any Opposition to speak of'.[31] According to Crawford, it followed that contentious Government programs, such as the ELs curriculum did not receive adequate parliamentary scrutiny, particularly from within the parliamentary Labor Party.

Also involved was the employment of political cronies as staffers. It was Crawford's view that the Lennon Labor Government had 'more spinners than any other government, in my experience'. Crawford concluded by declaring that: 'they're not all press secretaries, they're not all overtly spinners, they're not all people that we see. Some of them are hidden deep in the departments'.[32] He may well have been referring to the ELs policy planners in the Education Department's Bathurst Street offices in Hobart.

Herr also spoke out on the *Stateline* program. He endorsed what Crawford had said, and went on to describe the detrimental effects that were occurring with ministers attempting to administer the existing 'super-size departments': i.e., 'departments that have been combined in order to make it easier for ministers to meet their ministerial roles, and that means, again, senior civil servants and minders making critical decisions about what goes forward to the minister and from the minister into cabinet'. Herr made it clear that 'there are a lot of reasons why accountability, transparency and public access have all been diminished'.[33]

The Cresap Final Report 'Guts' the Department of Education of Curriculum Expertise and Creates a Curriculum Development Wilderness in Tasmania

The drive for fiscal stringency within the Department of Education, which began in the late 1980s, intensified the process of the politicization of the department, which, in turn, brought about internal changes that greatly affected the department's capacity for curriculum renewal. In 1989, the Gray Government was defeated and left the state in an economic 'black hole'.[34] Within the newly-elected Field Labor Government there was a widespread belief that drastic structural changes were needed within the department in order to reduce expenditure. Faced with an inherited and massive financial crisis, the new Minister for Education, Peter Patmore, commissioned Cresap Ltd to identify $18 million savings in the Education budget for the 1990-91 financial year.[35]

Cresap's Final Report attempted to justify the cuts by listing the inefficient areas of the department.[36] For example, the Curriculum Branch, the Research Branch and the Teachers' Aids Branch were closed down, and the valuable inner-Hobart real estate that housed these branches was sold off. The 'gutting' of the Curriculum Branch alone accounted for cuts in personnel from 77 people to a mere eleven, who were subsequently integrated into a newly developed section devoted essentially to curriculum delivery. Consequently, professional and curriculum development within the department were cut drastically.[37] It was also significant that in the corporate restructuring of the old department, which became known as the Department of Education, Culture, the Arts and Corporate Services, the new head Bruce Davis, came from a career in architecture.

Following the Cresap Report and the subsequent move by Warren Brewer, the Superintendent of Curriculum with the Department of Education, to the Curriculum Corporation,[38] *inter alia*, Graham Fish had responsibility for curriculum matters in the department. Fish attests that the department's curriculum development activities were now only a fraction of what they had been. Moreover, of special concern for this paper, he recalls that during the early 1990s, following the full impact of the Cresap cuts, and by the time of his move to the Tasmanian Examination Authority in 1993, the department had been practically 'stripped bare', 'gutted' of people with any worthwhile curriculum development skills. At this point in the history of the department, he recalls that people in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy simply assumed that any major curriculum initiatives would come from the Curriculum Corporation, and that schools and colleges would purchase the material.[39]

The full impact of these changes did not simply stop with curriculum development. Exactly what did all of this restructuring and corporatization of the department mean for teachers in schools? According to one retired school principal there was increasing cynicism amongst people in schools towards the contracted bureaucrats of the upper echelons in the department. Many teachers and principals now considered that the first loyalty of these senior bureaucrats was now to the government, a political body, rather than to the schools and the community that they served.[40] Whether justified or not, this signifies a deeper malaise within the Tasmanian education system.

ELs is Born as a Political Act

ELs evolved through a policy document called *Learning Together*, a Bacon Government initiative in 2000. Buoyed by strong electoral support, less than two years after being elected in a landslide, the Bacon Government initiated a program of social and economic 'reform'. This was encapsulated in a document called *Tasmania Together*.[41] After the initial round of extensive consultations, the Premier established the Community Leaders Group. This group 'had primary responsibility for the development of the plan and consulting with the community to see what the people of Tasmania wanted the plan to contain'. The group was drawn from the widest possible spectrum in the community, 'with every effort being made to include representation from sectors of the community who may previously have felt that they were excluded from decision-making processes'.[42]

From *Tasmania Together* flowed *Learning Together*. Michael Watt, at the time employed with the Tasmanian Department of Education, wrote how *Learning Together* was intended to complement *Tasmania Together* by 'presenting a long-term plan to transform Tasmania's education system by providing lifelong learning across childcare, primary schooling, secondary schooling, college education, vocational education and training, technical and further education, adult education and library and information services'.[43] This was the plan back in 2001 when Watt researched his paper, however in fact, the development and implementation of ELs never extended into Years 11 and 12 in the secondary colleges.

At the time that ELs was being floated, Ross Butler, mentioned earlier in this paper, was a principal in a large Tasmanian high school. 'Sometime in 2000', at a principals' meeting he first heard and read of the initial statements concerning ELs from the department. This came following years of 'constant bombardment of policy changes from the department', and there was 'little opposition from his colleagues to these ideas'. He recalled that the overall philosophical statements underpinning ELs were essentially unobjectionable, 'apple pie' and 'motherhood' statements that 'seduced the audience into agreeing with the new jargon and arrangements of work in schools'. He could understand how 'a young and inexperienced minister, such as Wriedt, was taken in by the overall philosophy of ELs'. But in reality, 'these statements disguised highly complex and extremely time-consuming assessment and reporting regimes in a jargon that was to prove to be largely meaningless to parents. It all got too far away from the

fundamental learning required of children in classes'.[44] True this is only one person's view of the context in which ELs was introduced to schools, but it certainly accords with the point already made concerning the absence of any programs of epistemic analysis and development.

By 2003, the basic framework for ELs had taken shape. Rigorous monitoring had occurred before the second wave of twenty-two schools was incorporated into the initiative. Utilizing a cascade model of curriculum dissemination (elsewhere critically evaluated by David Hayes[45]) during 2003, another sixty schools were included; in 2005, all Tasmanian state schools were involved, with assessment and reporting being phased in over a four-year period.

The Kersey group was a focus group of Tasmanian state school principals who cooperated with the author in researching this paper. They maintain that from 2000 through to 2004, people in Tasmanian state schools were embracing progressive education as never before. As far as they were concerned, the teaching service was fully supportive of Wriedt and her senior bureaucrats. According to the group, Wriedt was doing a wonderful job in her portfolio, and there were no 'wrinkles' in the way in which ELs was being rolled out. The group was unanimous in insisting that the watershed in the ELs saga came at the end of 2004 when major administrative problems emerged.[46] An ex-ELs planning officer concurs with this point, maintaining that the whole rollout became 'too rushed' towards the end when the political imperatives strengthened, and the government sought to get ELs off the front pages of the print media.[47]

No doubt *The Mercury* was well aware of the political outcomes of what it could achieve by continually reminding Tasmanians that ELs was a political creation and something Wriedt was using to advance her own political career. It did this by reporting statements such as:

- 'Ms Wriedt has continued to champion ELs';[48]
- '[ELs is] Education Minister, Paula Wriedt's "baby" ';[49]
- '[Wriedt] continued to be excited about the ELs'.[50]

These are just some of the reported statements that probably left Tasmanians in little doubt that ELs was as much about Wriedt's political ambitions, as it was about providing a quality integrated curriculum underpinned by constructivist pedagogy for Tasmanian

children. Clearly, ELs was perceived as being a political creation by the governing Labor Party, and was perceived to be 'fair game' by the Liberal Opposition and those people in schools and the community opposed to the curriculum.

The Vexed Problems Associated with the Student Assessment and Reporting Information System (SARIS)

The Kersey group contends that many of the problems associated with ELs came from schools that were due to join the ELs rollout in 2005. That was the year that SARIS was introduced. Consequently, there were many schools throughout the state that were dealing with two major initiatives during that year – ELs and SARIS. These schools were the source of many of the complaints that appeared in the press. Moreover, the SARIS rollout also exposed many problems with professional development. The Kersey group referred to many primary school teachers, who until this time in their professional life, had been able to hide their shortcomings with information technology (IT), but now, in many cases not only did they have to 'get on board' with ELs and SARIS, but they also had to learn basic computer skills. This generated discontent which soon found its way into the media and into Tasmanian Liberal attacks on the government. Seated amongst severe confusion about terminology that was played out in the media,[51] the mandated SARIS rollout simply increased teacher angst and caused community uproar. But this was not a controversy, *vis-à-vis* reporting to parents, that was peculiar to ELs. Earl and LeMahieu have observed that 'around the world assessment is becoming an extremely "high stakes" activity for students, teachers and schools. It is a highly politicized activity'.[52]

Student progress in ELs needed to be reported to the department for accountability reasons, and then communicated to parents and potential employers. Thus, SARIS had a critical role in the innovation, and its success hinged on teachers and schools accepting and adopting a computerized reporting program. Dissatisfaction with the system came from three areas: teachers, parents and prospective employers. By mid-2005, dissatisfaction with SARIS had reached the stage of being an uproar in schools. This was highlighted in an extensive AEU survey of teachers' workloads. For many teachers, computerized reporting was completely new, and coming on top of what they were being asked to do with ELs in general, the AEU survey showed that many teachers felt undervalued, and their concerns ignored. *Inter alia*, the report showed

that teachers were being 'bombarded' with change, with little appreciation of their plight by the department.[53]

In *The Mercury*, Heather Low Choy reported on teacher dissatisfaction with SARIS in a biting 2005 article. Teachers reported that 'they had broken down when dozens of remarks that had taken them hours to write disappeared from… SARIS'.[54] But it was not simply the SARIS software providing fruitful political ammunition for the Opposition. Because ELs had abandoned traditional subjects, teachers were asked to report on learning criteria such as 'acting honestly, ethically and consistently'. Peter Gutwein, Opposition Education spokesperson, declared that ELs 'had been a debacle on many fronts'. He added that 'the problems with SARIS raised further doubts about information parents would receive at the end of the year about their children's progress at school'.[55] The department clearly failed to get parents or employers on side.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Politicization of the Curriculum

With the politicization of the Department of Education, the credibility of the ELs bureaucrats became critical during the attempted ELs rollout. In researching two examples of curriculum change in Victorian schools, Brian Edwards reported a list of teachers' views of their employer, the Victorian Department of Education. These included cynicism concerning curriculum change, the motivation of Ministers of Education, and concluded that 'gone is the old Public Service – without fear or favour. Now it's political cronies'.[56]

These sentiments were echoed across Bass Strait. In an article headed, 'ELs rubbish, say teachers: Students now learning less', Low Choy from *The Mercury*, in September 2005, wrote that 'teachers say Tasmanian students are learning less under the… controversial new Essential Learnings curriculum'. Two state school teachers had defied departmental gag rules to speak out about ELs. One was from a primary school and the other from a secondary school. The secondary teacher claimed that 'most teachers would like to see ELs abolished'. The article spoke of an authoritarian department: 'When the Education Department's enforcers are around, we toe the party line, but in the staffroom we're saying what rubbish ELs is… It's like Chairman Mao's cultural revolution. You can't have a dissenting view'. *The Mercury* portrayed the teachers as protectors of educational standards: 'We're hoping it collapses before it does too much damage'.[57]

Business Portrays ELs and OBE as Masking Poor Literacy and Numeracy Scores

Low Choy headlined an article in *The Mercury*, highlighting employer dissatisfaction with ELs with 'Business hits ELs reports: makes no sense, say employers'. According to Low Choy, 'Tasmania's business community says it does not understand the … new Essential Learnings report cards. The Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and two of the state's top human resource firms say the reports do not make sense to employers'. ELs reports that did not indicate whether 'a potential employee can read, write and add up is of little benefit to their daily business operations'.[58] A director of one of these human resource firms claimed the ELs report cards 'made no sense whatsoever'. 'I think they're designed to remove accountability from the Education Department and the department needs to be accountable to employers and to parents'.[59]

An Example of Political Symbiosis: the AEU Links Arms with the Opposition

At the height of the statewide outcry against ELs during 2005, the Australian Education Union's Deputy President for Tasmania's North, Peter Kearney, spoke out against his members' workloads. Kearney's message was loaded with venom, and called on teachers to speak out against the changes to their routines and workloads associated with ELs: 'action to say enough is enough'.[60] But, the AEU was a traditional Labor Party supporter, and according to the Liberal Opposition and *The Mercury*, the union had to be coaxed into speaking out against the ELs rollout. Gutwein said the AEU had been 'all but mute' on problems with ELs. According to Gutwein, the AEU's 'actions, or lack of them, were in the interests of the Labor Party, not teachers, and did students a disservice'. The Opposition had been a 'lone' critic of ELs'.[61]

The Mercury reported Walker from the AEU saying that 'Wriedt and her bureaucrats had ignored AEU pleas for change'. 'They just pushed on with it,' she said. 'We were ignored. She was not willing to listen.' According to *The Mercury*, Walker maintained that 'ELs had been jargon-filled, overly complicated and pushed on teachers too quickly'.[62]

For many observers of the ELs saga, the 2004 AEU report on teachers' workloads was a watershed in its history. Certainly, the political consequences of the report were swift and sustained. For example, on 19 October 2004 in the Legislative Council, Tony Fletcher,

MLC for Murchison, basing his argument on the report, spoke out on 'the intensification of [teachers'] work' and 'how more work was being expected over a greater number of hours'. This, he claimed, was 'impacting upon the wellbeing of the educators and other allied staff of the education system and unless remedial action was taken to address this matter, it would have negative impacts upon the education outcomes that were being achieved'.[63] Fletcher went on to argue that the sheer pace of change demanded by the department from schools was having a detrimental effect on school communities and teachers.

Following the March 2006 'ELs' state election, the consequent dumping of Wriedt as Minister of Education, and the elevation of Bartlett to the portfolio, on 30 June 2006, Phillipa Duncan reported in *The Mercury* that 'Education Minister David Bartlett yesterday revealed the jargon-filled ELs would disappear from Tasmanian schools next year'. The newspaper reported that the government 'has spent more than $20 million implementing, developing, and advertising ELs, laptops for teachers and ELs-linked cash bonuses for principals'. For what? *The Mercury* stated that it had 'earned criticism from every quarter – teachers, parents, students, the Australian Education Union, education experts and the business sector'. Gutwein said the widely criticised framework had 'died a death by a thousand cuts'.[64]

ELs: the Final Political Act

The political process that 'finished off' ELs points to a fundamental weakness in the process on which the ELs bureaucrats prided themselves – consultation. There is simply no documented evidence on how the decision was made to end the curriculum. Anecdotal evidence suggests it came after one of the June 2006 Estimates Committee meetings, where senior Department of Education bureaucrats were meeting with the cabinet. On that same day, following some discussion concerning ELs and alternative curricula, the Minister held a press conference on the steps of Parliament House, and announced that ELs was a thing of the past. Although coming as no surprise to media-watching Tasmanians, the thousands of ELs enthusiasts, including most of the development and implementation team, people in schools and parents and children, were left scratching their heads at the sudden announcement that ELs was to be concluded. Tasmanians had learnt about the fate of ELs through the media, where so much of the drama had been played out.

Postscript and Conclusion

Several months after the 2006 state election, Ward interviewed Bartlett on the ABC *Stateline* program. She began the program by reminding Tasmanians that the 'controversy around the new Essential Learnings curriculum almost cost the previous Education Minister, Paula Wriedt, her seat'.[65] She then asked Bartlett what was really going to change with the Tasmanian Curriculum, with which he was beginning to replace ELs. She asked whether it was correct, as Wriedt had just recently stated that it was simply a name change. Bartlett responded by stating the government did not intend to ditch ELs, but would be returning to familiar terms, such as maths and English. The government, he said, would build 'on a very good base, we're ensuring that we're not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater … we are going to look at issues, learn from mistakes'.[66]

Did the government learn from mistakes with ELs as promised by Bartlett? In an ABC *Stateline* program on 3 October 2008, hosted by Ward, Simon Cullen, an ABC *Stateline* reporter, suggested that the government's new arrangements for the polytechnics, academies and training schools in the state 'prompted some comparisons with the failed implementation of the Essential Learnings framework'. A part of Bartlett's new Tasmanian Curriculum policy was the establishment of polytechnics, academies and training schools in the state for post-secondary students, aimed at increasing student retention rates. Ward contended that some parents were 'concerned it's the same children being used as the guinea pigs for these changes'.[67] On the same program, Jane Kovaks, a parent of a Year 10 student due to enrol in post-secondary education in 2009, complained that now it was the same students who were suffering from the government's proposed scheme for secondary colleges: 'it's all changing again'. 'It's the same group. It's the same year of children'. Cullen then contended that, despite the growing opposition to the scheme, the government was pushing ahead with it, apparently without learning a single lesson from the ELs years. This was despite the fact that when Bartlett had taken over the education portfolio from Paula Wriedt, he said that he had 'learned the lessons of the past'. Bartlett conceded that 'problems with putting in place the Essential Learnings curriculum led to public opposition to the changes'. Ward argued that there was 'a similar feeling towards [his] reforms'.[68]

ELs was essentially a political act. It was born through the quest for the maintenance of political power, and its eventual demise was through

the democratically expressed will of the people. Many of the causes of its demise, its essential failings, are to be found in the political domain. Political opponents perceived Wriedt and ELs as being fair targets. The political intent of ELs was well known, and *The Mercury* constantly reminded the Tasmanian public of the fact. It was a Labor government policy that aimed at the maintenance of political power.

ELs was the first attempt in Tasmania at system-wide K to 10 curriculum development and implementation in decades, but the Cresap cuts of the early 1990s left little expertise in the department to undertake such developments. The Cresap Report had also resulted in an upper-echelon bureaucracy in the department tied to contracts that did not always command respect and compliance from teachers. Corporatization and the politicization of the department furnished an education system wherein many teachers distrusted the motives of curriculum bureaucrats and administrators. These were not developments unique to Tasmania. While essential learnings continued as the basis of the school curriculum in many other Australian states, what happened in Tasmania to cause the demise of ELs?

The *Parliamentary Reform Act 1998 (Tas)* had a devastating effect on parliamentary scrutiny of government policy, serving to increase the number of government minders, who were little inclined to offer independent and critical advice. The increase in the number of political minders alluded to by Crawford and Herr seems to have done little to ensure the successful rollout of ELs. One is left asking whether independent public servants in the long-standing Westminster tradition, offering fearless and independent advice, may have furnished a more professional and successful management of the development and implementation of ELs.

As was the case with the shortcomings associated with OBE in WA, as illustrated by Berlach and O'Neill, the Tasmanian ELs initiative suffered severely from an absence of an epistemic analysis prior to full implementation. When difficulties arose during 2005 and 2006 about how to communicate agreed-upon meanings of key concepts and language to teachers, parents and other key stakeholders, such as employer groups, the curriculum planners were not able to remove these expressed difficulties from the media. Instead, it was *The Mercury* which controlled the public discourse. The Department of Education failed to take control of the public discourse, and politicians were left floundering, on 'the back foot'.

The ELs saga was marked by an intense linking of politics and the school curriculum. What does that saga signify for Tasmanian education? If ELs established the public acceptance of the right in Tasmania of a minister to develop and implement a curriculum that primarily sought the hegemony of a particular political party, or the advancement of a particular minister, then is it likely that Tasmanians can expect a new curriculum whenever there is a change of government? The possibility of this occurring has serious consequences for the role of state-provided education. And if this is so, what will be the consequences for the other components of the state's education system – for example, university faculties of education and private schools? In the future, will these institutions simply fall in line with the political ambitions of a particular minister of education?

REFERENCES AND ENDNOTES

1, *Mercury*, 6 Dec. 2007.

2, John Graham, Essential Learnings, AEU—Victoria, 2005, http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/professional/papers/Essential_Learnings/ (retrieved 12/02/08).

3, Virginia Richardson (2003). 'Constructivist Pedagogy', *Teachers College Record*, 105, 9, 2003, pp. 1623-1640. There are vast differences between constructivism and constructivist pedagogy. As a learning theory, contructivism dates back several decades. The exception is a form of constructivism that was transformed into pedagogy by John Dewey during the early twentieth century, although he did not call it constructivism. Constructivist teaching (pedagogy) as a theory or practice has only received attention in the past decade. Richardson has focussed on the many vexed issues associated with constructivist pedagogy. Richardson contends that a major difficulty for constructivist pedagogy lies in the shift from contructivism as a learning theory to constructivist pedagogy. A constructivist classroom provides students with opportunities to develop deep understandings of the material, internalize it, understand the nature of knowledge development, and develop complex cognitive maps that connect together bodies of knowledge and understanding (p. 1628). Richardson has mapped out a number of unresolved issues with constructivist pedagogy:

- Student learning: constructivist pedagogy typically is associated with enquiry-based learning and integrated subject matter, but we know that people learn in a vast number of ways: lectures, media, friends and peers, classrooms, and so on.

- Because constructivism is a theory of learning and not a theory of teaching, the elements of effective constructivist teaching are not known. There is a need for much research-based theory building here.
- Teachers' subject-matter knowledge. Not all teachers have in-depth knowledge across a number of disciplines: 'research within the last several years has indicated the importance of deep and strong subject-matter knowledge in a constructivist classroom, be it K-12, teacher education, or professional development'.
  Cultural differences: 'places constructivist pedagogy within a social constructivist frame … It involves looking at constructivism, itself, as a concept that is constructed and practised within our current cultural, political constraints and ideologies' (pp. 1629-32).

4. For example, Tony Dowden, 'Relevant, Challenging, Integrative and Exploratory Curriculum Design: perspectives from theory and practice for middle level schooling in Australia', *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 34, 2, 2007, pp. 51-71.
5. Norman Henchey, 'The New Curriculum Reform: what does it really mean?', *McGill Journal of Education*, Fall, 1999, pp. 227-242.
6. CBC News Quebec Restores Percentage Grades on Report Cards, 1 June, 2007, http://www.cbc.ca/canada/montreal/story/2007/06/01/qc-curriculumreform0601.html (retrieved 09/09/08).
7. British Council: School Curriculum: K-12 and Primary Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-education-uk-system-k-12-curriculum-england.htm (retrieved 10/10/08).
8. Richard Berlach & Michael O'Neill, 'Western Australia's English Course of Study: to OBE or not to OBE, perhaps that is the question', *Australian Journal of Education*, 52, 1, 2008, pp. 49-62.
9. Berlach & O'Neill, 'Western Australia's English Course'. p. 51.
10. See, for example, G.W. Rodwell, *With Zealous Efficiency: progressivism and Tasmanian State education, 1900-20*, William Michael Press, Darwin, 1992.
11. G.W. Rodwell, *With Zealous Efficiency*; his 'Australian Open-air School Architecture', *History of Education Review*, 24, 2, 1995, pp. 21-41; his ' "Only by Persistent Effort in the Face of Discouragement": Ccvic and school playgrounds, and eugenics in Australia, 1900-1920', *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 37, 2, 1996, pp. 129-48; his 'Nature Enthusiasm, Social Planning and Eugenics in Australian State Schools, 1900-1920', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 29, 1, 1997, pp. 1-19; his 'Open-Plan School Architecture: a continuation of a tradition of bureaucratically imposed innovation in Australian state schools', *Educational Research and Perspectives*, 25, 2, 1998, pp. 99-119.

12. Rodwell, *With Zealous Efficiency*, chap. 3.
13. Interview: Ross Butler, MHA, recently elected MHA for Franklin, Parliament House, Hobart, 10 July 2008.
14. J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*, Longman, London, 1984, p. 97.
15. C. Longuet-Higgins, Epistemics. In A Bullock, O. Stallybrass, S. Trombley (Eds), *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (2nd edn) Fontana, London, 1988, p. 279, cited in Berlach & O'Neill, 'Western Australia's English Course', p. 49.
16. M.J. Galgano, J.C. Arndt. & R.M. Hyser, *Doing History: research and writing in the digital age*, Thomson Wadsworth, Boston, 2008, p. 72.
17. See for example, Denis Lawton, *The Politics of the School Curriculum*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980.
18. Scott Bennett, 'The Reduction in the Size of the Tasmanian Parliament', *Research Note No. 2*, Department of Parliamentary Library, 1998.
19. R.J.S. Macpherson, 'History, organisation and power: a preliminary analysis of educational management in Tasmania', *School Organisation*, 1992, 12, 3, pp. 269-88.
20. R.S. Parker, The Politics of Bureaucracy. In G.R. Curnow and B. Page (Eds), *Policization of the Career Service*, Canberra College of Advanced Education and the NSW Division of RAIPA, Canberra, 1989, pp. 384-5.
21. Patrick Weller, 'Politicisation and the Australian Public Service', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 48, 1989, pp. 369-81.
22. R. Mulgan, Politicising the Australian Public Service? Research Paper # 3, 1998-9, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, pp. 3-4. http://www.aph.gov.au/LIBRARY/Pubs/RP/1998-99/99rp03.htm (retrieved 7/02/2008).
23. Scott Bennett, 'The Reduction in the Size of the Tasmanian Parliament', *Research Note No. 2*, Department of Parliamentary Library, 1998.
24. Bennett, 'The Reduction'.
25. Bennett, 'The Reduction'.
26. *Parliamentary Reform Act 1998 (Tas).*
27. Michael Stedman, 'Wriedt in Medical Mystery' *Mercury*, 5 Aug. 2008, http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,24126126-921,00.html (retrieved 6 Aug. 2008).
28. Stedman, 'Wriedt in Medical Mystery'
29. Richard Herr, 'Democracy and Small Parliaments: some diseconomies of scale', *Democratic Audit of Australia – December 2005*, p. 3.
30. Airlie Ward, Parliament Concerns, Transcript, ABC [Tasmania] *Stateline*, Broadcast 28October,2005 http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/tas/content/2005/s1493314.htm (retrieved 8/02/08).
31. Ward, Parliament Concerns.
32. Ward, Parliament Concerns.

33. Ward, Parliament Concerns.
34. R.J.S. Macpherson, Restructuring Accountability: Educative Policy Research into a Politically Incorrect Issue, Paper given to International Intervisitation Program in Educational Administration, Toronto and Buffalo, May 15-27, 1994.
35. Macpherson, Restructuring Accountability.
36. *Cresap's Final Report: Review of the Department of Education and the Arts Tasmania*, Cresap, Hobart, 1990.
37. *Cresap's Final Report.*
38. Warren Brewer, Interview, Ex Superintendent, Curriculum Branch, Tasmanian Department of Education; retired Director, Curriculum Corporation, Rose Bay, 6 July 2008.
39. Graeme Fish, Interview. Retired Principal Education Officer, Curriculum, Tasmanian Department of Education, Tranmere, 10 July 2008.
40. Personal Correspondence (anonymous), 21 Dec. 2007.
41. About Tasmania Together, http://www.tasmaniatogether.tas.gov.au/about_tasmania_together (retrieved 11/02/08).
42. About Tasmania Together.
43. Michael G Watt, Looking Back at Curriculum Change in Tasmania: Will the New Essential Learnings Framework Facilitate Successful Curriculum Reform? *Proceedings of the 2001 National Biennial Conference of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association*, Marie (ed.) Brennan, Education and New Citizenship, ACSA, Deakin, WA, 2001.
44. Butler, MHR, interview.
45. David Hayes, 'Cascade Training and Teachers' Professional Development', *ELT Journal*, 54, 2, April 2000, pp. 135-145 for the problematics of the cascade model of curriculum dissemination.
46. Kersey Group: a focus group of three practicing principals, Inveresk, 29 July 2008.
47. Ex-ELs planning officer, Hobart, 7 Aug. 2008.
48. Heather Low Choy, 'ELs of a Job for Teachers', *Mercury*, 19 Sep. 2005 http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,16744817-3462,00.html (retrieved 12/04/08).
49. Heather Low Choy, 'Dud Decoder of Courses Jargon', *Mercury*, 8 Sep. 2005, http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,16529267-3462,00.html (retrieved 19/02/08).
50. Heather Low Choy, 'Tasmanian Parents Will Have a Chance to "Vote" on Essential Learnings Report Cards Early Next Year', *Mercury*, 10 Oct. 2006.
51. Heather Low Choy, Dud Decoder of Courses Jargon, *Mercury*, 8 Sep., 2005, http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,16529267-3462,00.html (retrieved 19/02/08); Jargon Bust, says Wriedt, *Mercury*,

21 Sep., 2005, http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,16667108O-3462,00.html (retrieved 19/02/08).

52. Lorna M. Earl and Paul LeMahieu, Rethinking Assessment and Accountability. In Andy Hargreaves (Ed.), *1997 ASCD Year Book: Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA, 1997, p. 150.
53. Christine Gardner and John Williamson, *Workloads of Government School Teachers and Allied Educators in Tasmania: a Report Commissioned by the Australian Education Union*, Tasmanian Branch, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, 2004, p. 55.
54. Low Choy, 'ELs of a Job for Teachers'.
55. Low Choy, 'ELs of a Job for Teachers'.
56. Brian Edwards, Teachers' Professional Judgment of Mandated Changes, Policy Dysfunction, in the Classroom. In Catherine Harris and Colin Marsh (Eds), *Curriculum Developments in Australia: Promising Initiatives, Impasses and Dead-Ends*, Openbook, Adelaide, 2005.
57. Heather Low Choy, 'ELs Rubbish, Say Teachers: Students Now Learning Less', *Mercury*, 12 Sep. 2005, http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,16571874-3462,00.html (retrieved 19/03/08).
58. Heather Low Choy, 'Business Hits ELs Reports: Makes No Sense, Say Employers', *Mercury*, 13 Sep. 2005 http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,2284,16584303-3462,00html (retrieved 19/02/08).
59. Low Choy, 'Business Hits ELs Reports'.
60. Peter Kearney, 'Assessment and Reporting: Time for Action', *Ed.Lines*, 4, 1, March 2005.
61. Phillipa Duncan, 'Parents Push for 'Proper Reports', *Mercury*, 27 April 2006. http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,18942829-3462,00.html (retrieved 22/02/08).
62. Duncan, 'Parents Push'.
63. Hansard: Tas. Legislative Council, 2004, Tuesday 19 Oct. 2004, Part 2, p. 26.
64. Phillipa Duncan, 'ELs Axed After: Years of Confusion and Frustration for Teachers and Parents, the New Education Minister Acts… Minister Acts on Criticism and Axes ELs', *Mercury*, 30 June 2006.
65. Airlie Ward, Bartlett interview, transcript, ABC [Tasmania] *Stateline*, Broadcast 30 June 2006 http://www.abcnet.au/stateline/tas/content/2006/s1676047.htm (retrieved 22/02/08).
66. Ward, Bartlett interview.
67. Airlie Ward, Education Reform, transcript, ABC [Tasmania] *Stateline*, Broadcast 3 Oct. 2008,

http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/tas/content/2006/s2381697.htm. (retrieved 10/10/08).

68. Ward, Education Reform.