

Scientific Freedom Under Fire

The New Draft Curriculum for New Zealand Schools

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There is a draft curriculum available for New Zealand schools and is now in the consultation process. It can be downloaded as a pdf here:

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/nzcurriculum/draft-curriculum/science_e.php

And the current curriculum is available here:

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=3525&indexid=1005&indexparentid=1004>

It makes significant changes in some areas and these are a concern to those who hold scientific and religious freedoms as being important. The issue is the rise of atheistic materialism in the new Draft Science Curriculum.

The Current Science Curriculum

The current curriculum framework is quite straight forward when it comes to the Science topic of genetic change and variation. Rather than mandating a specific philosophical perspective, it just outlines the facts that need to be taught. We should **“investigate and understand how organisms grow, reproduce, and change over generations.”**(p52) At level 7 this requires students to **“describe processes that may lead to genetic variation, and understand the implications of these for plant and animal breeding.”** At level 8 (Form 7, or Year 13) this becomes more specific and students have to **“investigate and describe the diversity of scientific thought on the origins of humans.”**

Now this is, I think, a brilliant and informed perspective to take on the issue. The statement recognises that there is a diversity of scientific thought and that informed students have to study these. Note that there is no mandate to *believe* any particular philosophical perspective, just to study and understand them.

The Draft Science Curriculum Under Consultation and Review

The draft curriculum for Science is different. It states, **“Students develop an understanding of the diversity of life and life processes. They learn about where and how life has evolved, about evolution as the link between life processes and ecology, and about the impact of humans on all forms of life. As a result, they are able to make informed decisions about significant biological issues.”**

The new draft also favours the use of **“evolution”** at level 7 with it being used to describe the **“role of DNA in gene expression”** and how **“the interaction between ecological factors and selection leads to genetic changes within populations.”**

Now if we redefine the word “evolution” to simply refer to something more like “observed change” then this use is understandable. This kind of evolution is agreed by all. The problem is that this is not the use the writers have in mind. At level 8 students must **“explore the evolutionary processes that have resulted in the diversity of life on Earth and appreciate the place and impact of humans within these processes.”**

This is a clear statement that the draft curriculum writer wants NZ students to accept the philosophical perspective that *all* diversity of life on Earth has come about by natural materialistic

processes. Not only that, but that this atheistic perspective should form the basis of **“informed decisions about significant biological issues.”**

There seems to be loading of the dice going on in other areas as well. In the draft science table we find that across all strands **“students will understand that scientists’ investigations are informed by current scientific theories”** (Y5,6) and that **“students will understand that scientists have an obligation to connect their new ideas to current and historical scientific knowledge”** (Y7,8). This “obligation to connect” seems to be saying that science is only about going with the flow and that the flow is atheistic evolution. This kind of language is laying the foundation for outlawing discussions of alternative perspectives.

My Response

First, I am not convinced that overuse of the highly contentious term “evolution” is prudent when it is simply aspects of genetic variation being studied. The current level 7 statement is a good example of how this problem (and the ridiculous extremes seen in the United States) can be avoided.

Second, the Living World Level 8 statement needs to be changed or removed to avoid mandating an atheistic religious perspective in our science classes. If kept, one suggestion is: “Explore the processes that result in diversity of life on Earth and appreciate the place and impact of humans within these processes.”

Third, the current curriculum statement at level 8 to “investigate and describe the diversity of scientific thought on the origins of humans” is a good one and should be retained.

Lastly, the overview statement for level 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the Science Table should be changed to something like

“Students will understand that scientists’ investigations *also consider* current scientific theories...”

“Students will understand that scientists have an obligation to *compare* their new ideas to current and historical scientific knowledge”