



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Teachers and Curriculum

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 1, 2015



*In memory of Richard Jones
1967–2015*

Editors

Special Issue: *Stopping for a moment: The influence of change on teachers' professional practice*

Jenny Ferrier-Kerr and Kerry Earl

With afterword by Susan Groundwater-Smith

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About the Journal

Teachers and Curriculum is an online peer-reviewed publication supported by Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER), Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. It is directed towards a professional audience and focuses on contemporary issues and research relating to curriculum pedagogy and assessment.

ISSN 2382-0349

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Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

- innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
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- book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that

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- reports on research in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment;

- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and
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These should be **avoided where possible**; the journal preference is for footnotes rather than endnotes.

Referencing

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Acknowledgement of Reviewers

The Editors would like to acknowledge the contribution of the reviewers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Special Issue

<i>Proem: Stopping for a moment: The influence of change on teachers' professional practice</i> Jenny Ferrier-Kerr and Kerry Earl	1
<i>The view looking back from here: A perspective gained from different roles in a 'hive'</i> Darylle Lawler	5
<i>The personal and the public: A journey of teacher development in times of educational change in New Zealand</i> Jean Saunders	11
<i>Leading from the front: Lessons in leadership and sustainable change</i> Richard Jones	17
<i>Running a marathon: One teacher's experience of implementing change</i> Miriam Prince	23
<i>Making professional development personal</i> Kelly-Anne Powers	27
<i>Bicycling a path: A personal professional journey</i> Carolyn Smith	31
<i>'Moore Strong': A story of hope and recovery</i> Donna Goodman	35
<i>Afterword: Learning from change: Risks and rewards</i> Susan Groundwater-smith	41

BICYCLING A PATH: A PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY

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Prior to her current position, Carolyn was a Year 5 teacher and Director of Music at Te Mata School in Havelock North for 14 years. Te Mata School's association with the teacher education programme at Napier EIT and her work mentoring student teachers motivated Carolyn to apply for a study award to finish her undergraduate degree. In 2014 Carolyn and her husband returned to his home city of Hamilton for the year so that she could study full-time towards her Bachelor of Teaching degree, which she has successfully completed. Carolyn is now a teacher and team leader at Pukete School in Hamilton.

Professional summary

This author traces a professional journey in teaching using bicycling as a metaphor to highlight uphill, freewheeling and tandem stretches along the way. Using literature to articulate stages on this path still ongoing, readers are invited to compare experience of both specific developments in New Zealand education and understanding of similar stages in personal and professional development as a teacher.

As I rode my bicycle to the university campus with my backpack full of research papers that were all beginning to make sense, and essays that were intertwined with experience, I reflected over the professional decisions and development that have brought me to this place. Thirty-four years ago I arrived at this same campus with a schedule of pre-set papers and my own ideals and aspirations that would lead me into three years of study, a teaching job and more than thirty years of learning as a primary school teacher. I liken my ongoing learning and professional development to a bicycle ride. Hence, in this reflection on my professional learning journey, I use this as an analogy to describe and link my experiences around the changes that have occurred not just in my career but also in developing my professional identity.

In those early years, I was seen as the young teacher who had plenty of new and creative ideas. Those first few years of teaching were very much aligned with the autonomous age that Hargreaves (2000) has written of. Nevertheless, I received limited guidance to help me map my ride and navigate my teaching practice. During this time therefore, I rode solo, often in high gear and frequently found myself going off the track—sometimes this was unintentional and at others, I deliberately ‘went off’ on tangents to follow my own interests and those of my students. I recall that the students in my care were happy, well-behaved and enjoyed presenting their work creatively. Nice handwriting, knowing their times tables and being able to do long multiplication and division were key signposts I looked for to assure me and the students that we were heading in the right direction on our journey. Notably too, when I look back at this phase of my teaching career I observe that I was beginning to develop the ethic of care that Noddings (1993) refers to, “We care for you, and because we care, we will persist in helping you to master the material that is our common responsibility” (p. 52). As an enthusiastic young teacher with a ‘save the world’ attitude I was reflecting mostly at a surface level, and with little guidance from others formed my own beliefs about what good teaching was. Ben-Peretz, Kleeman, Reichenberg, and Shimoni (2010, as cited in Smardon & Charteris, 2012) state, it is “difficult, almost impossible, to teach a teacher to teach, the only way to promote professional development is through self-discovery of one’s professional identity” (p. 31) and I concur, however I now know that this is not a journey to be travelled alone. While finding my own way on the track led me to develop some strongly held personal views about teaching, and caused me to become reflective about what worked for me and my students, this level of autonomy (Hargreaves, 2000) also contributed to numerous bumps and uphill challenges on my journey towards what Hoyle (1974) has termed extended professionalism. These influences are discussed later in the paper.

For me, the Tomorrow’s Schools era, which began in the late 1980s, brought with it numerous direction and gear changes. During this time of major change schools were required to develop charters, self-manage finances, select appropriate professional development for staff, employ staff,

purchase classroom furniture and upgrade buildings in line with their identified needs. This was a significant time in my teaching career. I was now on a journey that risked rating overall accountability and performance higher than the needs of individual children. The various hoops and obstacles that came with new curricula and appraisal systems were placed in my path to jump over, swerve around and at times, tumble over. As a curriculum leader, I was given a budget with the key role being to select courses, resources and equipment for teachers and the school. My role implementing a new Arts Curriculum for instance, was based more around funding an advisor to come and ‘do’ a staff meeting on music, visual art, drama and dance, than on professional conversations that drew on our own expertise and inquiry about the needs and wants of our students and school community. In looking back, it seems that I was simply implementing what the prevailing market model demanded. This was somewhat akin to cycling a predetermined track that everyone enjoyed and benefitted from but had no input as to where they were heading, the difficulty of the terrain and how to meet the needs of all participants.

With what seemed the inevitable privatisation of professional development delivery, providers set up their own offerings at increasingly upmarket venues. Because schools and teachers now had the ability to select what professional development goals to pursue, teachers would attend courses with an eagerness to learn something, a new trick or formula, then come back to school and modify it for implementation into their current practice. This was also my experience. Very seldom were the courses backed up with professional research that was shared with the participants, or even the explicit expectation that teachers would in fact implement any new strategies for teaching and learning.

At the time, I firmly believed I was improving my practice, as I was enthusiastic about new ideas. Looking back however, I can see that I was so self-confident about my teaching ability and practices that I was simply fitting any new practice, with minimal reflection, into what I thought I was already doing well. My yearly appraisal for instance, affirmed that I was doing a great job because all of the boxes had double ticks, and it was very rare for the appraiser to identify aspects of my practice that could be improved upon. Parents would request that children be in my class and I had a high level of job satisfaction. In reality, I was freewheeling down a gentle slope, so confident that at times I’d even take my hands off the handlebars. This effectively exemplified Larrivee’s (2000) view that, “Teacher beliefs are self-generating, and often unchallenged. Unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations” (p. 96). Hence, in this time the consequences for my practice were less structured planning, haphazard and uninformed implementation of new methodology, and a somewhat creative adherence to achievement objectives. I do not and cannot regret this phase of my journey, and I still believe that the children in my classes benefitted from a creative and enthusiastic teacher who was open to their needs and interests, and willing to experiment with new ways of hooking them into learning. I reflected daily on what went well but this was more around whether the activity went well in regards to the children’s involvement, rather than at the deeper critical level around the learning that took place. This kind of surface reflection has been described by Larrivee (2008) thus:

At this level the teacher’s examination of teaching methods is confined to tactical issues concerning how best to achieve predefined objectives and standards. Beliefs and positions about teaching practices are supported with evidence from experience, not theory or research. (p. 348)

At this midway point in my career however, I began getting my students to set goals for their learning. They would set their goals and revisit them at the end of each term. This continued for several years without my having even a glancing thought that as a teacher I should have my own goals and that I too was a learner. It was when an advisor from the private sector took our staff through the Numeracy Project that a crucial turning point occurred for me. As she rode tandem with me, I had the first opportunity in my, by then, 20 year career, to intentionally watch someone else teach and have them observe me. She provided me with academic readings and it was expected that I would have deep and purposeful discussion with my colleagues to examine and reflect further on key ideas. When I reflect now, I recall that at times it felt like the wheels were coming off as I was required to modify my practices, develop new strategies, and consider the research around these new ideas about learning and teaching. I was considered a competent teacher yet suddenly I was being questioned about why I did something a certain way, how it lined up with research and what aspect of my teaching practice my new learning could enhance. I was now part of the kind of community of practice that Lave and

Wenger (1991) have argued is critical for effective, high quality professional learning. In our community of practice—a syndicate of teachers—we developed and shared “a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic” and deepened our “knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, as cited in Ng & Tan, 2009, p. 38). This ‘rocky road’ experience had two important outcomes. One could be seen as negative and the other positive but both were challenging. The negative came from my sense that all I had known and was confident doing was suddenly being questioned by my school leaders. It was not that I was doing anything wrong but I now had to examine, justify, and adapt my pedagogy, and consider the research aspects. I had always respected my leaders and knew their motives were well founded, even so for quite some time, I felt challenged and threatened.

In this journey to become a reflective practitioner, I was “negotiating feelings of frustration, insecurity, and rejection” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 296). I still loved classroom teaching but at times I felt my time to prepare was being compromised by copious readings and professional development workshops, observing and being observed, and writing up my professional learning journal. While I considered I was well along the continuum towards extended professionalism (Hoyle, 1974) the demands were great. Furthermore, I was experiencing the hills and valleys of Fisher’s (2012) process of transition. My classroom teaching experience was sometimes placing me in the rest areas of denial and resistance to changing gear around long held, seemingly successful practices. With opportunities for observation and discussion along with reading research and working under strong professional leadership however, I began to experience the enthusiasm and progress of the zone of exploration (Fisher, 2012).

I liken this crucial professional development phase of receiving and giving collegial support, to being like riding in a peloton. Even though my commitment to my new learning was still sometimes an uphill climb and required slipstreaming behind colleagues, at other times I just clicked into gear easily. My strong sense of doing my best for the children in my care was still at the heart of my being a teacher and I was now combining this with purposeful and critical inquiry into my practice.

It was around this time that I was involved in developing a pilot scheme for teachers with a diploma qualification, called Practice Based Attestation. The work was research and practice based and really got me on the road to feeling positive about being an inquiring teacher and learner. The attrition rate was high with only four of the original nine teachers from our school completing the work. Sadly with a change of government the funding to follow it through ceased. In terms of gaining salary equivalence with degree holders, that decision meant our work had been in vain. I was, however, now pedalling more strongly, confident again in my practice and willing to accept guidance from others and willing to use the research to enhance my practice. For me, this was the transformation inquiry that Wagenheim, Clarke, and Crispo (2009, as cited in Sardon & Charteris, 2012) talk about. I understood that becoming a better teacher was about “reflecting on and questioning deeply held assumptions in an experiential cycle of inquiry, developing new strategies, testing in action, and learning” (p. 504). I began to critically reflect from a personal, syndicate and school wide level. I was willing to question my own beliefs about good practice and developed an interest in relevant research. I also noticed that as I became more critically reflective I was acting with “integrity, openness, and commitment rather than compromise, defensiveness or fear” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 295). Hence, my initial reactionary and somewhat negative responses became positive and I began to seek opportunities to learn more.

My journey now has me attending lectures, reading copious articles and enjoying the view back over my professional development journey. Having a full year to focus on study has given me an opportunity to look back over my ride through many changes in the education sector and recognise their relevance and impact on me. At the time they were occurring, I just got on with the tasks at hand and tried to always focus on my skills as a classroom teacher. Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, and Le Cornu (2011) talk about teachers needing to be “resourceful, adaptable and knowledgeable but they also have to be activist professionals, capable of being discerning, imaginative problem solvers able to deal with constant and relentless social, economic and technological change” (p. 4). I now see myself as that teacher—the learner with a backpack full of experience and knowledge and an ongoing desire to change and improve my practice. I’m not riding off into the sunset with a sense of completion, but extending my journey with a positive sense of what might happen next.

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