

COMMENTARY: NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM/TE ANGA MARAUTANGA O AOTEAROA PROJECT: A RESPONSE TO CLARK

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Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu - Focusing on what matters

The national curriculum sets the direction for learning for NZ school students.

The current curriculum was developed sequentially from 1991- 2003 in seven essential learning areas.

This development was followed by a curriculum stocktake that culminated with a report to Cabinet in 2002.

The Curriculum Stocktake report (available at www.minedu/goto/csr) concludes that the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa are coherent, sound statements, which teachers perceive to be useful for preparing students to live and work in the 21st century.

However, the findings of the Curriculum Stocktake report call for a renewed focus on quality teaching and empowering schools to meet the needs of all students. The report recommended that the current curriculum be modified to ensure a clearer focus on high expectations for all New Zealand students, and to provide more flexibility for teachers and schools to help students achieve these expectations. It also recommended sharing learning expectations with parents and communities in order to build stronger partnerships.

The Curriculum/Marautanga Project was launched in 2003 to build on the stocktake report to reframe and refocus the national curriculum. In both English and Māori mediums. The project intends to:

- clarify and refine student outcomes,
- focus on quality teaching,
- promote flexible approaches to school curriculum, and;
- develop materials to strengthen partnerships with parents and communities

CLARIFYING OUTCOMES

Clarifying the educational outcomes that are important for students to work towards will involve debates about what matters most and will raise questions about the nature of knowledge (epistemological questions). Reviewing which outcomes matter most will provide conditions that encourage and support educators to think about questions such as: To what extent is knowledge a database of facts organised in disciplines, transmitted to students and stored for use at a later date? To what extent is knowledge dynamic and generative - something that makes things happen?

FOCUSING ON QUALITY TEACHING

Focusing on quality teaching will allow the exploration of issues such as how to teach students values yet at the same time help them to question those values? For example: when is it all right to break the law? Would it have been acceptable to break the law and release other peoples' slaves? In this case the law made it legal to hold slaves but a higher ethical principle, all men [sic] are created equal, denied that right.

The quality teaching focus will also provide an opportunity to grapple with issues of how best to develop social cohesion while at the same time preserving separate identities and how to teach students to balance self-interest with participation in, and contribution to, political, economic, social and cultural groups.

PROMOTING FLEXIBLE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Promoting Flexible Approaches to School Curriculum will involve examining questions about the nature of reality (ontological questions). What reality should the curriculum create? How should the authenticity and relevance of learning experiences provided for students be addressed? How does school reality fit with students' experiences and backgrounds? What is assumed or taken for granted in school practices?

As well, questions about the nature of truth (axiological questions) will also be important to consider. What constitutes right or wrong? What should we value? What counts as art and what counts as wellbeing? What is a quality human experience?

CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

Clark raises questions about how the curriculum should be structured. It is important to remember here that it is intended that the national curriculum set the direction for learning. It should not dominate the teaching process.

Essential learning areas are one way of organising what we want students to know, do and value. Setting out the curriculum in this way does not mean it needs to

be taught like this. For example the current NZCF states: "Schools may achieve a broad and balanced curriculum in a number of ways; for example, by organising their programmes around subjects, by using an integrated approach, or by using topic or thematic approaches" (1993, p.8).

All methods of organising knowledge (for example in libraries, databases, on the web and in books) involve using constructs developed by people. The person doing the planning and the learning follows their own path as they make links that go off in different directions and link information in many different orders and patterns.

The curriculum project is bringing the sequentially developed national curriculum together as a whole map that sets national directions for learning (the intended curriculum). Schools and teachers then engage in decision-making processes to develop school programmes that are relevant and engaging for their particular students (the taught curriculum). The most important thing is the curriculum that students take away as a result of their learning experiences (the learnt curriculum). Walt Whitman put it beautifully when he said:

*There was a child went forth every day
And the first object he looked upon that object he became
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day
Or for many years, or for stretching cycles of years.*

*The early lilacs became part of this child
And grass
And white and red morning glories
And clover and the song of the phoebe bird...*

Think for a moment about what you know, can do and value as a result of your schooling.

The Ministry is committed to a process of engaging educators in revitalising the curriculum. Diversity yields richness. The richest perspective on curriculum will be that which emerges from a synthesis of many perspectives.

At present education professionals are discussing these issues and many more via forums on the Curriculum Project Online and participation in regional seminars. This inclusive process values teachers' professional knowledge and also supports them to develop a deeper and richer understanding of curriculum.

All educators are invited to register to join on-line discussion forums and participate in seminars over the next two years to develop an up to date national curriculum that reflects not only the knowledge needed for the future but also the best teaching strategies and learning theories. A curriculum that engages all students and is challenging, meaningful and intellectually demanding.

To register visit the website at <http://www.tki.org.nz/e/community/nzcurriculum/>