EDITORIAL:

Critical perspectives on curriculum

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Fifteen years ago, a prominent historian of New Zealand education, David McKenzie, wrote that because "the school curriculum is inevitably the focus of politics... [it is] open to continuing criticism..." (1983 : 20). The papers included in this volume provide additional evidence to support McKenzie's assertion. They also demonstrate the validity of Colin Bailey's shrewd observation that the success of any curriculum "depends on the enthusiasm and respect with which it is accepted and understood by teachers" (1970 : vi).

Charmaine Pountney offers thoughtful comments on the nature and purpose of the curriculum in our schools. Indeed she suggests curriculum must remain open to a continuing examination and criticism, as should our provisions for schooling. Pountney's plea for a greater recognition of those who have expertise in a particular curriculum is very timely given the recent developments in all curriculum areas in this country.

Andy Begg takes as the main theme for his paper the notion of 'curriculum as process' rather than product. He argues that curriculum development becomes more integrated and educationally worthwhile when a product orientation is replaced by a consultative, considered approach to curriculum debate, implementation, and revision. What is urgently needed, Begg suggests, is a detailed examination of the many philosophical, sociological, and educational issues underpinning and influencing curriculum debate. This process involves (among other things) questioning who controls the curriculum, the rationale for intervention and the promotion of particular concepts (linked to prescribed or unstated outcomes), as well as the historical antecedents to a given curriculum.

The Cowan and Diorio study of computer usage in the professional development of Otago and Southland secondary school teachers serves as a reminder of the place of modern technology in teachers' professional development. They outline some problems associated with Internet based professional development course delivery, most notably the participants' fear of losing collegial relationships and face-to-face interaction, as well as general anxieties associated with computer usage.

The authors view computer technology as a valuable adjunct to other types of development programmes, and suggest that its educational contribution is substantial once certain difficulties are resolved. Finally, Cowan and Diorio remind us that professional development opportunities are maximised when teachers are viewed as educators and not technicians; as professionals whose interests lie beyond simply discussing curriculum, examination, and school management concerns.

Educators will probably be aware of the frequency with which education debate is often reduced to considerations of 'efficiency'. The concept of educational efficiency is explored by Gregory and Howard Lee from an historical case study perspective. Debate about 'efficient education', they explain, has occurred for over a century in New Zealand, but has seldom been subjected to critical discussion. Lee and Lee argue that this observation alone should point to the inherently problematic and indefinite

nature of the concept of 'efficiency'. They observe that at certain periods in our history the promotion of efficient schooling gathered considerable momentum, notably among politicians who believed that 'efficiency' could be easily defined and readily attained.

Readers with special interests in children's drawing and art, and human development generally, will find much of interest in Lorraine Ritchie's study. Ritchie cites studies of children's drawing which comment on image conceptualisation, representation, and the problem-solving activities that children engage in, within a broad human development context. She describes the difficulties implicit in drawing human figures, and notes the benefits of appropriate teacher and adult intervention.

Ritchie also refers to the need to consider children's social and cultural experiences, and child-centred learning and teaching approaches, in the arts. Her observations are especially significant, because "the arts" feature in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* as an "essential learning area" (Ministry of Education, 1993 : 15; Ministry of Education, 1994 : 10).

Languages and communication skills also appear as an essential learning area in the Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993 : 10). Warwick Elley notes, however, that although debate over reading and literacy has been 'long-lingering' in New Zealand, there is every reason to be proud of the quality of New Zealand reading programmes both here and abroad. He identifies those factors that make our approach to teaching reading so successful, and discusses some recent teaching initiatives. Elley concludes in favour of retaining 'tried and true reading programmes' in preference to phonemic training.

In the related field of literacy, Richard Ward expresses concerns about new movements in the field of students' writing. He notes the potential for an overly-structured approach to a subject where creativity should be a key ingredient. Learners should be free, he contends, to choose a form (for themselves) that suits their purpose and context. This issue of context is taken up by Elizabeth McCabe when she describes attempts to introduce contextually-based and authentic assessment of learning. McCabe uses mathematics for some of her exemplars, but her message applies to all areas of the curriculum.

Educators, of course, appreciate that reading and literacy programme formats have not been the sole topic of recent education debate. The teaching of mathematics, as Elley indicates, has also been subject to critical scrutiny. Readers will recall that in 1993, *the New Zealand Curriculum Framework* identified mathematics as one of seven essential learning areas. According to the framework document, the study of mathematics should enable students "to see the relevance of mathematics to their lives" (Ministry of Education. 1993 : 11).

Elsie Kinavai and Fred Biddulph's paper examines the notion of 'realistic' or 'community' mathematics, which holds exciting prospects for both learners and teachers. The authors give examples from Papua New Guinea and New Zealand of ways in which a realistic teaching method can enhance students' mathematical understanding, particularly their problem-solving and conceptual abilities.

Charly Muke's paper provides further support for Kinavai and Biddulph's general thesis. He demonstrates that recent curriculum reforms in Papua New Guinea have succeeded in aligning more closely the language of the home, community, and school. Muke reports that the linkages between schools and communities have been improved dramatically with the new curriculum, which acknowledges the variety of cultures in Papua New Guinea and represents a welcome shift away from a top-down approach to curriculum construction. These observations, and those of Kinavai and Biddulph, are also echoed in the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) seven year study of mathematics, science and technology, published in 1996 (OECD, 1997 : 4).

Ken and Carol Carr describe a teaching experiment with young children. The curriculum topic is one that forms an important part of mathematics. They ask if more challenging mathematical ideas might be learned by young children, an issue that has been addressed by mathematics educators in recent years. Turning to another aspect of mathematics education, Ken Car examines the 'empty number line'. He suggests that this device may help our students gain a greater number sense, particularly in the early years of schooling.

Health and physical well-being, another essential learning area prescribed in the 1993 Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993 : 16), is the focus of Philippa Newick and George Salter's research respectively. Newick, for her part, cites research which advocates a more holistic or multidimensional approach to health education, with due consideration being paid to emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, and physical well-being. She argues in favour of creating 'health promoting schools', and outlines some of their characteristics. Although Newick envisages that schools will teach health education in a variety of ways, she contends that certain underlying principles can be identified for individual school consideration.

In a complementary contribution Salter alerts readers to the social construction of the physical education curriculum. He emphasises the importance of identifying those social, cultural, and political factors that influence this curriculum, and laments the displacement of *te reo kori* from the most recent draft physical education curriculum. Declaring that such a displacement not only reflects a hierarchy of forms of knowledge and cultures but also contradicts professed support for biculturalism elsewhere in the curriculum, Salter advances a compelling case for educators adopting a critical approach to proposed curriculum reforms (see also Gerritsen, 1998 : 2).

Maxime Ostermann discusses how computers may be used in the primary classroom. This issue is one that teachers confront each day, and Ostermann's insights (based on careful classroom observation) will provide much useful information for teachers.

Many of the readings have social implications running through them. Kay Harrison enunciates a strong message to teachers of the social studies. She makes a plea for teachers to motivate their students to social action, and describes some outstanding examples of this from the United States. In doing so she also points out some difficulties that we should heed.

Teachers in preparation need appropriate models when they complete their student teaching. Callaghan and Cranston confront this crucial issue in their paper, and make some practical, research-based suggestions for those who work with student teachers.

A reading of this collection of articles in *Teachers and Curriculum* demonstrates that researchers have heeded Fred and Jeanne Biddulph's request, as joint editors of the first volume, that educators and other interested parties maintain a critical approach to curriculum.

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