

Teachers and Curriculum



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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM is an annual publication of the School of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

It includes articles about curriculum issues, research in the area of curriculum and informed curriculum practice. Reviews of curriculum related books may also be included.

The Opinion item is contributed by a leading New Zealand educationalist.

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

- raise important issues to do with the curriculum
- report on research in the area of curriculum
- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
- review books that have a curriculum focus.

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EDITORIAL

GREG LEE
EDITOR 2009

On behalf of the Editorial Committee I have much pleasure in presenting you with this volume of *Teachers and Curriculum*. Its delivery is somewhat later than expected, however, because of my move from The University of Waikato to The University of Canterbury in January 2009 to assume the role of Head of the School of Educational Studies and Human Development at the College of Education. Prior to my shift south I had offered to serve as Editor of the journal, and wanted to honour this commitment despite my change in circumstances. I trust that the high quality content of the present volume will compensate fully for the late release of the publication.

In this eleventh volume of *Teachers and Curriculum* we feature a range of articles that are topical for educators of every disposition. In keeping with our policy since the journal's inception in 1997 the Opinion feature is provided by a leading educationist who, in this instance, has some sage advice for advocates of national standards based on developments in Aotearoa New Zealand and in the United Kingdom. David McKenzie's thesis is compelling and provocative. He explains—from the perspective of an educational historian—how and why the emergence of a tests regime is likely to militate against the promotion of equity in education and the ways in which it will affect learning and teaching adversely.

The theme of engaging critically with what is being presented by politicians and by other interest groups as educationally desirable and/or essential is also taken up by Lynley Tulloch, albeit with special reference to Education For Sustainability (EFS). She describes how political, fiscal, and other factors have shaped discourses relating to EFS with the result that EFS philosophies about the abolition of poverty, the cessation of human rights' violations, and the active promotion of social justice and of personal and group wellbeing sit awkwardly within the dominant Aotearoa New Zealand free market capitalist economy. While Tulloch wants to see EFS proponents realise their goals of social and environmental transformation, she suggests that this can happen only when the all-pervasive "enterprise culture" is critiqued more overtly and more extensively, when there is more dialogue about the ingredients of an ideal society (and of its constituent communities), and when EFS is linked more directly to education and to critical literacy than to rhetoric. Tulloch concludes that teachers and teacher educators should examine their own pedagogy closely so that words and meanings, and taken-for-granted assumptions, are analysed comprehensively. She maintains that in so doing, fiscal and political influences over attitudes and behaviours will be understood better.

Tulloch's and McKenzie's thesis about the many benefits to be derived from adopting an analytical and critical perspective on what is offered in the name of "education" is echoed unequivocally by Peter O'Connor. Lamenting that the current preoccupation with (and the overemphasis on) future-focused schooling has meant the loss of worthwhile opportunities to focus on present-day educational practices and dilemmas, O'Connor contends that the importance of context, meaning, and process is seriously undervalued if not ignored altogether in our contemporary schooling system. In seeking to place empathy at the centre of any educational enterprise, to regard learning as having "inherent motivations and ends", and in wanting to foster the educational merits of "the pursuit of surprise", he argues persuasively in favour of an approach to teaching and learning that no longer is constrained by "achingly predictable [curricular demands]".

The particular educational insights to be gained by authors being able to draw on their personal experience while making connections with research literature are revealed clearly in Nadine Ballam's article, just as they were in O'Connor's contribution. For her part Ballam outlines the many factors that affect children's

engagement with schools and with the schooling process. She explains that gifted youth from low-income families often have many challenges to confront, as we might have predicted; for example, financial constraints and particular emotional and psychological pressures. Ballam makes a strong case in favour of deliberate interventions in order to avoid the emergence among talented youth from low socioeconomic status backgrounds of a damaging, limiting, mindset—one linked to school failure and early withdrawal by pupils from schools. Identifying and fostering talent is especially important, in tandem with serious consideration of risk and protection factors for gifted youth who come from financially impoverished families. In this connection Ballam maintains that (more) attention should be paid to confronting deficit thinking and stereotypes relating to this group of pupils. The solution, she concludes, lies with carefully targeted, intelligent, interventions.

The theoretical and practical advantages obtained by educators who demonstrate a willingness and an ability to reflect on their thoughts and deeds in a constructive yet critical manner are also explained in Anne Hume's paper, although in this case the chosen domain is that of tertiary education and the subject matter is science education. One of Hume's intentions is to try to enhance students' learning through reflective practice as a key component in an action research and critical theory methodology. Part of this process involves her deliberate "scaffolding of student reflective skills" so as to promote high(er) quality thinking about education on their part; in short, to move students from providing merely a description of events toward a meaningful analysis and in-depth engagement. Hume, like Ballam, describes the personal as well as the wider significance of her research. At its core is her desire to see learners gain greater understanding of the activities in which they are immersed through personal journeys and discoveries, culminating in enhanced pedagogical awareness and knowledge. Hume explains the close relationship that exists between better teaching practice and students' personal identification with the importance and worth of research, as well as its consequences for the development of skills relating to problem-posing, problem-solving, and higher order thinking. In so doing she reminds readers that student teachers are concerned understandably with their daily survival in classrooms, with predictable outcomes for the prospects of "transformational learning" and for their professional practice. As Hume demonstrates, a formative assessment orientation helps to enhance students' appreciation of the importance of personal reflection in all their learning and teaching activities.

In a similar vein, although with particular reference to contemporary school-based information and communication technologies, Ann Harlow and Bronwen Cowie examine a variety of strategies for maximising teachers' learning and their subject competence and confidence. The provision of numerous opportunities for educators to become more familiar with these technologies is a vital ingredient in their professional development, these authors claim. As Harlow and Cowie explain, creating "professional learning communities" without relying largely on external experts in a curriculum area can help reduce barriers to, and anxieties about, teacher learning. Moreover, such communities promote a greater sense of collaboration and collegiality. Drawing on the findings from an evaluation of a nationwide initiative about teachers' laptop usage that spanned six years and encompassed the primary and secondary school sector, Harlow and Cowie stress the significance of actively supporting personal exploration of and experimentation with laptop computers.

The final full-length article in this collection examines contemporary debates relating to national standards and testing in the Aotearoa New Zealand primary school curriculum. Echoing McKenzie's concerns about the faulty premises underpinning these standards and their utilisation, Lee and Lee demonstrate that the current National Government is ignoring historical literature which reports in considerable detail on experiences with a nationwide standards' regime for over half a century and on their legacy. The Lees conclude that the introduction of a system of standards is neither necessary nor novel.

The next two items in this volume consist of a Research Note and a Book Review. In the case of the former Peter Stanley looks at the capacity and willingness of researchers to assess and evaluate their own practice as part of their personal education journey. He discusses the various challenges involved in searching for and locating participants from a previous study ten years later, in making decisions about the apparatus to be used for recording interviews, and in the choice of a venue for follow-up interviews. Stanley also describes the resistance strategies employed by some people when he attempted to meet and reconnect

with former participants, and expresses his disappointment when meetings did not proceed as smoothly as anticipated. He reminds us, tellingly, that research should be seen as an "intensely human process", one that involves much more than academic intervention into people's lives. Rather, the process has to enable participants to build good relationships based on explorations of their narratives and for them to appreciate that their involvement in a piece of research is both meaningful and significant.

Our last contribution re-examines gifted and talented youth, although in this instance emphasis is placed on how to nurture positive, high quality, relationships between their teachers and the children's parents. In reviewing a recent publication on this topic Nadine Ballam and Peter Stanley criticise some assumptions relating to the authors' definition of "gifted" and to their failure to consider the ways in which people's expectations heavily influence children's performance. Moreover, Ballam and Stanley lament "the medicalisation of giftedness" that is a feature of this Ministry of Education-sponsored resource and the tendency to adopt uncritically a middle-class perception on gifted and talented youth. Middle-class parents are more able and are much more likely to use the resources described in the publication than are working-class parents, and they are probably less threatened and perplexed by education jargon. Ballam and Stanley suggest that all boys and girls should be in educational settings where their abilities and interests are nurtured, regardless of their composition and scope. This recommendation has particular merit in the contemporary, compulsory, schooling system in Aotearoa New Zealand.

On behalf of the Editorial Committee I hope you will find the content of this volume to be intellectually stimulating and at times controversial. Both are vital components in a publication that is dedicated unapologetically and proudly to teachers and to curriculum.

GREGORY LEE
EDITOR