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### Mindfulimplementation of curriculum as construct

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## MINDFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRICULUM AS CONSTRUCT<sup>1</sup>

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As I explore *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007), I'm reminded of Nelson Mandela's (2003) famous proclamation that "education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world". Educators are wielders of this power and so bear the responsibility of questioning our own world-changing actions and the policy documents that inform them. To what degree are we aware of the particular education we are delivering; its construction, its origins, its assumptions? To what extent are we examining the *NZC* as an educational construct born of a particular social and historical moment? This paper looks into some of the discourses that have shaped the *NZC* to begin to understand the document's purpose and construction, some of its inconsistencies and subsequent challenges for implementation, and its pedagogical influence on educators. My hope is that greater understanding of the *NZC* will assist educators to be more mindful of our actions in the society-building process of education, so we are aware of conceptions of reality we are changing and those we are perpetuating.

### Introducing the New Zealand curriculum

From the 1870s to the 1980s, educational curriculum in New Zealand consisted of subject syllabuses with largely prescribed content (McGee & Cowie, 2008, p. 91). Liberal educational thought gradually built over this period, until a major shift was instigated in the 1980s, when public consultation on education culminated in the Picot report and Tomorrow's Schools policy (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998, p. 21). Situated within broader economic discourses, such as free-market philosophy, schools were given more autonomy, allowing them to be administered by independent Boards of Trustees while being accountable to the new Ministry of Education (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998, p. 93). This represented a shift in New Zealand education characterised by more freedom at the local level in conjunction with accountability and standardisation at a national level.

The challenge of maintaining a national standardisation and assessment-model while assigning more power to schools has been tentatively solved by making the *NZC* an outcomes-based policy. The *NZC* envisions young people who will be "confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" (MoE, 2007, p. 8) and seeks to outline the knowledge, skills and key competencies that will enable all students to achieve this vision. This vision implies a model New Zealand citizen who will contribute to the country's wellbeing, particularly its economic health, and ensure it is able to thrive into the future. It is interesting to note the framing of the *NZC* around the concept of a developing *individual*, who certainly interacts with a local or global community but is always distinct from it and whose progress is documented solely on individual terms. A pattern begins to appear here in the worldview of the *NZC*, of perceiving both society and knowledge as an accumulation of single 'pieces', the latter posing a formidable challenge for achieving a "coherent" curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 9).

### Discursive influences: The language of the curriculum

A curriculum is never neutral, as it is reflective of the ideologies and discourses of its time, particularly those that have accrued enough weight to inform educational policy. The *NZC* has a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The fifth of five articles written by beginning teachers about the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC, MoE, 2007) reprinted in the original order (see <https://www.tandc.ac.nz/tandc/article/view/286>). [This series of five is followed by two new invited commentaries especially for this issue.](#)

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discursive influences which can be detected in the language of the principles, values and learning area statements.

### **Individualism**

This discourse conceives of the individual as the centre for transformation and growth. Principles like *high expectations* convey this emphasis on the individual's personal progress: "The curriculum supports and empowers all students to learn and achieve personal excellence" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Although principles such as *community engagement* may appear to move towards more collective thinking, they tend to still revolve around the individual as the pivotal unit: "The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). This language frames the student as separate from their community, enlisting it as an abstract source of external support. Individualism is a deeply-embedded ideology of western civilisation as explained by Siedentop (2014): "Since the sixteenth century and the advent of the nation-state, people in the west have come to understand 'society' to mean an association of individuals" (p. 7). The *NZC* perpetuates this conception of society and aims to educate generations of individual students.

### **High expectations**

Educational literature around the power of high expectations on young people is extensive. The *NZC* explicitly affirms its high expectations for students in its first principle of *high expectations* (MoE, 2007, p. 9) and its first value of *excellence* (MoE, 2007, p. 10). It is interesting to consider how the structure of the *NZC* shapes teachers' expectations of students. One study found that teacher expectations varied most according to the age and school level of the student (Lane et al., 2010, p. 172). This may be directly informed by the levels laid out in the *NZC*. A consequence of this is that teacher expectations of what would constitute excellence for a student could become confined to the Achievement Objectives for their age.

### **Ecological sustainability**

The principle of *future focus* (MoE, 2007, p. 9) encourages exploration of "sustainability, citizenship, enterprise, and globalisation" (p. 9) and "ecological sustainability, which includes care for the environment" (p. 10), is one of the values outlined in the *NZC*. Their curricular presence signifies a social awareness of the environmental concerns of our age and connects with the education outside the classroom movement which strives to foster students' engagement with the natural world in order to advance sustainability (Hill, 2012, p. 15). It may be difficult, however, to reconcile the powerful economic undertones of the *NZC*, along with its worldview of an individual independently excelling, with the language of collective, interdependent relationships that surrounds sustainability discourse.

### **Learner-centred and sociocultural theory**

The wording of the *NZC* is entirely centred on the student, with a notable absence of acknowledging the other players in the educational process. The principles are described as "putting the students at the centre of teaching and learning" (MoE, 2007, p. 9), connecting to the educational movement away from teacher-centred classrooms. Yet the *NZC* is not written for students, it's written for teachers and administrators and used almost exclusively by only them. This connects to sociocultural theory of the more knowledgeable individual seeing the learner's path for progress and setting tasks just ahead of them and also adds an inauthenticity to the picture of students as protagonists in education. The ambiguity of what it means to be at the "centre of teaching and learning" begins to become apparent.

### Reconstructionist theory and coherence

There is an idealism in the curriculum principles and values that reflect reconstructionism. The values chosen are described as allowing us to “live together and thrive” (MoE, 2007, p. 10), and there is certainly a sense that a world full of individuals who are innovative, inquisitive, curious, pursuing excellence, diverse, equitable, community-focused, etc, would be a fantastic place to live. However, these values and principles appear distinct from, and in some ways discordant with, the learning areas. The *NZC*, with coherence as one of its principles (MoE, 2007, p. 9), claims to offer “a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions, and opens up pathways to further learning” (p. 9). Yet the links needed to unite the separated elements of the *NZC* into a coherent whole are absent; left to schools to discover (or remain unaware of): “The specific ways in which these values find expression in an individual school will be guided by dialogue between the school and its community. They should be evident in the school’s philosophy, structures, curriculum, classrooms and relationships” (MoE, 2007, p. 10). This stance appears to be influenced by the discourses around personal values and the State/individual where it is considered sensible to distance matters of deep personal significance from the State by ceding responsibility for clarification to individual schools and communities. Coherence of knowledge is discussed as follows.

### Construction of knowledge into learning areas and key competencies

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the *NZC* is its division of knowledge into learning areas and achievement objectives. While the *NZC* claims to offer a coherent education (MoE, 2007, p. 9), it is schools that are left with the pivotal task of unifying all the *NZC*’s fragments. Whether they are aware of this responsibility is not known. Rather, it is expected that many schools accept the widespread compartmentalisation of knowledge in disciplines as being characteristic of knowledge itself—in many ways encouraged by the structure of learning areas. Each of the learning areas have been constructed to achieve a purpose and provide particular knowledge and values. I have chosen to focus on English, as it is the learning area that I will primarily teach from.

### English

Prioritised as the first learning area, after which the others are ordered alphabetically, English claims to provide the learning that is central to all learning in English-medium schools and a largely English-medium New Zealand society (MoE, 2007, p. 18). This learning area aims to help students “become increasingly skilled and sophisticated speakers and listeners, writers and readers, presenters and viewers” (MoE, 2007, p. 18). It is structured around “making meaning” and “creating meaning” (MoE, 2007, p. 18) and values these processes, of understanding and creating, more than the actual ideas that are understood or created. This links to its curriculum purpose, that it “gives students access to the understanding, knowledge, and skills they need to participate fully in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of New Zealand and the wider world” (MoE, 2007, p. 18). English could draw on concepts relating to the social sciences, science, technology, etc, to connect the learning of processes for understanding (what English aims for) with actual content to be understood (an aim of other learning areas), but this is not made clear in the learning areas. As such, a value embedded in English and in English’s position of import in the *NZC* surfaces: the *ability* to make or create meaning is more important than the meaning itself. Perhaps the origins of this unintentional value are the difficulties of reaching consensus as a nation on ideas that are important for young people to understand. Therefore, teaching the ability to understand is less contestable than trying to identify concepts that we all agree are worthy of understanding. Nevertheless, the message embedded in the structure of the English learning area—that process supersedes ideas—becomes the result and threatens to infuse education with a superficiality that does not value the acquisition of genuine ideas.

### **Other learning areas**

The construction of knowledge into learning areas is an organisational choice which, while helpful, has limitations. If schools are deeply conscious of the true fluidity of knowledge beyond the bounds of disciplines, they will seek to develop their curriculum to be coherent by working with, between and beyond learning areas. If the arts “transform people’s creative ideas into expressive works that communicate layered meanings” (MoE, 2007, p. 20) then there is no reason students couldn’t take the profound ideas they’re discussing about “relationships that exist between people and the environment” (MoE, 2007, p. 30) from social sciences and create a piece of theatre inspired by them. When the learning areas are left in their divided state with no surrounding conversation about wholeness of knowledge or sharing of concepts across different areas, the fragmentation of knowledge becomes ingrained and leads to an array of societal issues such as inter-disciplinary competition and narrow conception of reality.

### **Key competencies**

The key competencies are highly commendable. They offer an ideal collection of capacities for the 21st-century learner to be able to participate meaningfully in society. The *NZC* offers no guidance around how these competencies can actually be developed within students. Teachers must pursue the cultivation of these competencies in their students through experimentation and intuition.

### **An outcomes-based curriculum**

In many ways, the *NZC* is a document of ideals. It is a reaction to prescriptive curricula of the past, instead striving to leave content choice to school preference while still providing desired outcomes in the form of standards (achievement objectives) and key competencies. The *NZC* adheres to a view that learning occurs in a progression and so structures itself in curriculum levels that represent increasing levels of sophistication. Achievement objectives and standards act as markers on this progression, to show learning as it advances. A challenge with this is that schools and teachers must move students along this progression without being able to clearly see what it would look like. Schools are tasked with devising their own curriculum that takes the *NZC*’s framework of ideal outcomes and offers a learning path for students to reach these outcomes. The learning areas’ achievement objectives are frequent enough to prevent this from becoming too formidable, whereas the key competencies provide no markers. Schools must explore their own resources and ideas for helping students to develop these competencies or leave it to chance that they will develop naturally “over time” within “social contexts” (MoE, 2007, p. 12), which is the extent of the guidance the *NZC* offers for key competency development.

### **Influence of the curriculum on pedagogy**

The *NZC* plays a significant role in shaping pedagogy, both in its explicit stance on teacher actions in effective pedagogy (MoE, 2007, p. 34) and in its structuring and framing of desirable education in New Zealand. There are limitations in estimating how teaching practice may be affected by the curriculum, particularly from my perspective as an aspiring, not fully practising, teacher. Therefore, this section comprises of my suppositions about how curriculum policy could shape pedagogy, drawing on my own experiences and observations as well.

### **The curriculum’s perspective of effective pedagogy**

The *NZC* offers seven evidence-based pedagogical concepts that have a positive impact on student learning. The first, “Creating a supportive learning environment” (MoE, 2007, p. 34), encourages teachers to foster positive relationships in the classroom and with the wider community and families, with attention to cultural diversity. This is expressed when schools engage in culturally responsive and relational practice and actively foster healthy, happy relationships between students, faculty and those beyond the school. I have witnessed much effort along this line of action, although it appears to

sometimes be tokenistic or subverted by the underlying motive of ‘raising achievement’, which can give the relationships a sense of insincerity. The seventh concept, “Teaching as inquiry” (MoE, 2007, p. 35), is particularly important for teachers as lifelong learners and ever-advancing practitioners. It requires that teachers regularly inquire into the teaching-learning process and their role in it, in order to adapt practice and enhance students’ learning. This is a powerful model for teachers’ continual improvement, without which, students are subjected to stagnant and potentially harmful teaching. Like the first approach, I have similarly noticed that inquiry practice can also be superficially implemented when teachers do not feel they have sufficient time or motivation to carry out the ‘extra’ work that it demands.

### **Structural impact on pedagogy**

Although the effective pedagogy section outlines promising concepts to impact teacher practice, the learning areas and key competencies quite possibly have a more pronounced impact on pedagogy as the most frequently used sections of the *NZC*. As teachers strive to bring them into effect, they are influenced by their wording, structuring, content and what has not been included.

The division of the knowledge content of the curriculum into learning areas has profound implications for pedagogy. Although coherence is valued by the policy, teachers, particularly secondary teachers, often learn to see the learning areas as distinct areas of knowledge that exist in isolation. Most secondary schools (and universities) teach in subjects, which may be a reflection of New Zealand societal structure and western patterns of compartmentalising knowledge. Nevertheless, as coherence is not embedded into the structure of the learning areas, those “natural connections that exist between learning areas and that link learning areas to the values and key competencies” (MoE, 2007, p. 16) remain hidden unless schools deliberately bring them to light. As discussed earlier, the learning area English is mostly concerned with processes of making and creating meaning and doesn’t specify content to learn upon. This provides a natural space for content from other learning areas to link up and enrich the students’ learning in multiple areas. A student learning about the colonisation of India in social sciences could study literature produced in that era in English, developing a deeper understanding of the ideas of the period as well as learning how to “make meaning” (MoE, 2007, p. 18). Unfortunately, these opportunities may not be recognised by schools that continue to teach according to traditional division via subjects.

Students should be made aware that learning areas are constructed and not naturally or inevitably separate. This is one example of how the curriculum is going to impact my pedagogy—it demands that I converse with my students and fellow teachers about the coherence of knowledge and that we work together to make the links between learning areas visible. I envision collaborating with my colleagues to develop integrated unit plans and assessment tasks. If there is considerable resistance to a coherent collaborative curriculum, I may need to restrict the aforementioned conversations to my classroom—creating opportunities for my students to bring knowledge they have gained from other learning areas and develop them further through English processes.

Another aspect of fragmentation that impacts pedagogy is the division of each learning area into the micro-learning of achievement objectives. Once again, breaking knowledge into manageable pieces serves to aid us in engaging with something which, as a whole, is beyond our comprehension. However, it can distort the nature of learning if those ‘pieces’ remain disjointed and do not find greater meaning in unity. Teacher pedagogy may be influenced by the achievement objectives if the teacher tries to enact them one by one, discarding the last as the new is taken up, never consciously drawing on their mutual complementarity. My pedagogical response is to design a programme that advances students across diverse achievement objectives, drawing on prior knowledge, moving forward in multiple ways so my students constantly make connections between everything they learn with me, everything they learn in other learning areas, and things they are learning in the wider world.



## Mindfully educating with the NZC

In any examination of an aspect of education, it is important not to discount the tremendous advances that have been made in this noble profession, nor to unjustly criticise the dedicated efforts of experienced educators, researchers and policy writers who have helped construct the document in use today. That the 2007 NZC is a remarkable work outlining New Zealand's hopes for its young citizens is apparent, and it offers educators much guidance in their efforts to empower their students to reach their potential. I am grateful that we have the NZC to aid us in this work.

Becoming more aware of the discourses that have shaped the NZC and the conceptual underpinnings of the structure of the document allow educators to implement it with greater understanding of its potential impact on students and the world at large. Throughout this paper I have questioned the fragmentation of knowledge, the excessive focus on the individual, the superficiality of valuing process and technique over ideas, and other limiting constructions which I have found to be present in the NZC, with the hope that awareness of the constructed nature of the NZC will encourage more mindful implementation. There are ways that these limitations can be transcended through practice as well as opportunities that remain hidden within the scope of possibilities in the NZC should educators seek these out. Educators should continue to recall that we do not passively deliver a neutral education; we co-construct social reality alongside our students, colleagues, fellow human beings. This demands that we continuously grow in our understanding of the kind of education we are delivering, the influence we're wielding and the ideological documents, such as the NZC, that we're propagating. Only then can we begin to feel comfortable about our role as practitioners of the world-changing process of education.

## Shirin White biography

I am an English teacher and library assistant at Hastings Girls' High School, with Samoan and Canadian whakapapa and a kiwi upbringing. I am interested in the society-building power of education, spirituality and honest dialogue which I believe hold the promise for building a universally-empowered global community. In 2017, I completed a Master of Teaching and Learning from the University of Waikato. I also hold a Bachelor of Arts in English from Massey University and create poetry for my Instagram @desolateplacesbloom.

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