



---

## Volume 21 Issue 1, 2021

### The interjection of politics in the curriculum

Ben Deane

**Editor:** *Kerry Earl Rinehart*

**To cite this article:** Deane, B. (2021). The interjection of politics in the curriculum. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 21(1), 25–29.  
<https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v21i1.373>

**To link to this volume:** <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v21i1>

---

### Copyright of articles

*Authors retain copyright of their publications.*

Articles are subject to the Creative commons license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/legalcode>

Summary of the Creative Commons license.

### Author and users are free to

**Share**—copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

**Adapt**—remix, transform, and build upon the material

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

### Under the following terms

**Attribution**—You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use

**Non-Commercial**—You may not use the material for commercial purposes

**ShareAlike**—If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original

**No additional restrictions** – You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

### Open Access Policy

*This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.*

## THE INTERJECTION OF POLITICS IN THE CURRICULUM<sup>1</sup>

**BEN DEANE**

*Fraser High School*

*New Zealand*

The *New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) expresses the Ministry of Education's aims for learners in English medium schools. The curriculum document is the foundation to what is expected of schools, teachers and learners in the New Zealand school system. It draws on political motivations and promotes ideals of 'desired citizens' for New Zealand's future society. The curriculum policy establishes a set of guidelines as a national vision for schools to refer to. Although this is an educational policy, within schools it can be difficult to measure the implementation of the front half of the curriculum that focuses on ideology. The back half of the document, which focuses on achievement objectives for students working at different levels, is the measurable area of the curriculum that is implemented through national levels' assessments. Throughout the curriculum, the notion of the 21st-century learner is incorporated as a theme. This creates the space for technology in modern education, using technological tools available to improve success in learners. The curriculum attempts to prepare students for continued learning outside of the official education system. The notion of an outcomes-based curriculum is important. It is clear, through my school experience, that discourses of achievement are based on commonly predetermined assessment outcomes.

### Understandings of the NZC

Citizenship ideals relate strongly to the political influences of the curriculum. The *NZC* presents a space for politics to have an influence through the ideologies portrayed in the *NZC*. The curriculum asserts the notion of the 'desired citizens' of New Zealand's future society. The Foreword, written by the Secretary of Education, describes the curriculum as "a framework designed to ensure that all young New Zealanders are equipped with the knowledge, competencies, and values they will need to be successful citizens in the twenty-first century" (MoE, 2007, p. 4). This statement reflects the curriculum's aim of shaping what is deemed a productive society in the future. These underlying ideals are constructed through political motives for social, economic, cultural growth as a nation and reiterated through the *NZC*'s discourse of citizenship.

The *NZC* Vision incorporates four key attributes (MoE, 2007, p. 8) that view the youth of New Zealand as "confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners" (NZC, 2007, p. 8). These attributes are then broken down into sub-attributes, such as resourcefulness, relatability, and critical and creative thinking, in order to contribute towards New Zealand's wellbeing. Within this section of the *NZC*, ideals of citizenship are made clear as the document attempts to influence those attributes students will leave school with and bring into society. Educators have referred to curriculum shaping (Hunter, 2011; O'Neill et al., 2004) recognising curriculum decision-makers' ability to instil their judgements on what are considered important values to be encouraged and modelled within the schooling system.

This political influence is represented in Figure 1 The Education Act and the curriculum diagram (MoE, 2007, p. 43). The diagram shows the top-down flow of government policy to the school curriculum and reinforces the political underpinning of the *NZC* starting with The Education Act of 1989. The *NZC* is a complex foundational document that covers curriculum in schools in New Zealand's education system. The Figure 1 top-down model builds on the political control implemented within education through

---

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The second 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.](#)

Corresponding author

Ben Deane [bendeane1@gmail.com](mailto:bendeane1@gmail.com)

ISSN: 2382-0349

Pages 25–29

curriculum. The model is tiered and shows hierarchy in curriculum decision-making. Thus, the *NZC* can be seen as having a political nature in an attempt to instil desirable traits to shape students as they flow through the New Zealand education system.



**Figure 1: The Education Act and the curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 43)**

Koh (2015) recognises 21st-century learners as anyone using the tools and technologies available in the present day for learning. A 21st-century learner embodies the constant advances in technologies and the ever-growing space for technology in modern society. Technology surrounds our everyday lives through social media, communication and information gathering, and the demand for technology skills in the New Zealand workforce is a prominent aim. The *NZC* recognises the importance of technology and the way in which it can be used to improve education. Koh (2015) recognises the importance of technologies in education but also notes the challenges imposed by (and in) the pedagogy. Creating a space where students can distance themselves from the entertainment provided in technology and shifting their mindset to use it for education can be difficult. The aim here is the effective implementation of the 21st-century learner concept and developing effective pedagogical practices to use technology in schools. I have witnessed these challenges during my time in a secondary school, and keeping track of students' learning whilst they use technology can be difficult. The *NZC* dedicates a page to e-learning in pedagogy (MoE, 2017, p. 36) and suggests what is desired from e-learning but fails to give direction. This lack of direction leaves room for interpretation and implementation because the intended curriculum is really enacted by teachers. Technology in curriculum is a complex new field as teachers experiment with new tools for successful outcomes.

### Discourse and learning theory

Within the purpose and scope of the *NZC* (MoE, 2007, p. 6), a paragraph is focused on breaking down the marginalisation of groups and individuals within the schooling system. This refers to identities built around sexuality, gender, ethnicity, disability and social and cultural backgrounds. Although there is strong discourse around inclusion within the *NZC*, barriers remain to meeting this ideal in New Zealand schools. The idea of an acceptance of diversity is noted in the vision, principles and values of the policy, but there is continual disparity in achievement for groups from diverse ethnicities and disabilities. Literature focusing on culture and disability in New Zealand education constantly refers to the historical marginalisation of Māori and the lack of inclusion of disabled students (Berryman et al., 2015; Giovanni & Hilary, 2016; Stace, 2007; Teese, 2013). The *NZC* attempts to break down social disparity and the impacts of historical marginalisation. Still today, Māori students make up a large proportion of students who are underachieving against the expectations set by the *NZC*, and disabled students continually face inclusion difficulties. A recent Education Review Office (ERO) report (2016) recognises that “there are

not enough schools where Māori students' achievement is comparable to that of non-Māori, or where schools can demonstrate that they are making a difference for these students" (p. 30). This displays the parallels of the intended and implemented curriculum. The intention of breaking down the ideals of colonial domination in education is present in the *NZC*, but systematic reform is slow. Discourses of inclusion, recognition of diversity, and disparities in achievement show the importance of schools implementing the front half of the curriculum to allow for equity in achievement. Apple's (2015) analysis of scholarly work by Bernstein (1977), Teese (2013) and Bourdieu (1984) around curriculum, notes the way curriculum can be a force behind social inequality. This conception of curriculum being a producer of inequality, is influenced by the problematic idea of creating a one size fits all curriculum in a diverse society.

Discourses of student-centred learning are thoroughly integrated into the *NZC*. Drawing on notions of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, themes of student-centred collaborative learning are found throughout the *NZC* (MoE, 2017), specifically, comments within the principles such as "students should be put at the centre of teaching and learning" (p. 9), the values—"students will learn about ... their own values and the values of others" (p. 10), and within the entire document. The idea of putting the student at the heart of the teaching and learning model shows progression from old ways of teacher domination and creates a more holistic space reinforcing the concept of *ako*. This learning theory allows students to be active participants in the learning process as their ideas are validated and supported through good pedagogy. Breaking down the power relations of the classroom allows the teacher and students to all learn from each other as a cohort. The *NZC* creates the space for students to share their opinions and values, and aims to create spaces for diversity to thrive. This can be seen as a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

### The learning areas

The learning areas' statements hold different discourses, as this section of the curriculum begins to specify learning knowledge. Although the learning areas are compartmentalised, the *NZC* aims to allow secondary schools to create integrated programmes aligning with achievement objectives and achievement standards. Priority subjects become apparent as the learning areas indicate the importance of literacy and English in education. Although literacy skills can be developed in a range of learning areas, a major priority is put on English studies. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) recognises this and in the context of New Zealand university entrance regulations, students are required to study English up to Year 12 (NZQA, n.d.). The priority of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum can lead to other learning areas being deemed less important. The learning areas of technology, the arts, social sciences and health and PE might be considered less desirable subjects, as schools stress the importance of literacy and numeracy. Although all subjects incorporate literacy and numeracy, often these skills are not valued in other subjects. This may restrict student choice, as many schools put a major focus on achievement in the subjects of English, mathematics and the sciences.

The aim of the *NZC* is to create connection between the taught subject areas and the values and key competencies through pedagogy. My specialised area is the social sciences, particularly geography. The social sciences learning statement expands on the notion of citizenship as the focus is put on students understanding the world that surrounds them. The language used in the statement reciprocates the political influence of the importance of economic growth. Words such as *active*, *informed* and *responsible* are used to indicate how students will participate as citizens (MoE, 2007). The statement further develops the importance of identity as a concept for understanding self and recognising New Zealand as a bi-cultural society building on the values of the *NZC*. Social sciences allow students to explore and show all five of the key competencies of *thinking*, *using language*, *symbols and texts*, *managing self*, *relating to others* and *participating and contributing*. This builds on understanding of how we function as a society and allows for students to explore a range of ideas around modern living, society and environment.

## Curriculum and pedagogy

The *NZC* achievement objectives present direction for specific learning intentions within a learning area. These are a result of what knowledge and skills the Ministry of Education deems important for students to learn in each subject. In this space, curriculum meets assessment. The achievement objectives allow the tracking of students' learning outcomes through schooling. At the secondary level, this is monitored through internal and external assessment. Assessment is an interesting field when it comes to curriculum and involves a range of unforeseen issues. Restrictions, such as teaching to assessment, and students only wanting to learn what is required for assessment, create challenges in pedagogy and learning opportunities. The amount of assessment also creates issues around timing. Teachers are often restricted by assessment in terms of the ability to explore topics outside of what will be assessed. Much is lost. This comes back to the outcomes-based model of curriculum in education. New Zealand schooling, specifically at the senior level, is based on this model of measuring learning through assessment. This can influence school decision-making as achievement goals are determined by achievement standards' results.

The *NZC* states: "The flexibility of the qualifications system also allows schools to keep assessment levels that are manageable and reasonable for both student and teachers" (MoE, 2007, p. 41). This suggests the MoE sees all students as having the capability to achieve the measurable qualification platform that has been designed for everyone. Through my initial teacher education, we have explored issues of a one size fits all education and the challenges this brings. The achievement objectives within the *NZC* reflect an outcomes-based model of educational achievement. With the introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), schools prioritise meeting achievement standards and this can create inter and intra-school competition. Secondary schools' NCEA results are seen to represent learning, and assessment results can influence ways teachers perceive students and act towards them. The results of NCEA assessment also influence a student's acceptance to study at a tertiary institution. Issues surrounding assessment may create a stressful and competitive space for secondary students. While some students excel under this style of measuring educational achievement, all students are different and, for some, standards-based assessment creates stress, and results may not show a student's true learning. NCEA results and success have a relationship to money, in terms of school funding and scholarship funds. Assessment conflicts, such as stopping students from sitting an external exam to maintain school averages, are not unheard of. The NCEA assessment process can be a restrictive force on teaching practice and the learning of students.

## Conclusion

The *New Zealand Curriculum* is a complex document filled with the government's aspirations for students through teaching and learning. The underlying ideals of the curriculum become clear through critique of the different sections, and key themes become apparent. Citizenship aims are conveyed as the *NZC* portrays the values, key competencies and learning to be acquired by students by the completion of their schooling. The *NZC* aims to instil desirable learning dispositions to enable entry into the workforce and for students to further their studies. Political influences are intertwined throughout the document and can be seen in the discourse that comes back to that idea of 'desired citizens'. This discourse covers social, cultural, economic and environmental concerns. The *NZC* also recognises New Zealand as a multi-cultural society that is continuing to grow in its diversity but is failing to adequately address it. The growth and importance of technology is made apparent through the ideal of the 21st-century learner. The space for these curriculum tools is growing as a response to the demands of work and employment. Although the messages of the *NZC* are clear, there is room for teacher interpretation of its delivery; guidance for pedagogy seems limited. The policy can be referenced for ideas but lacks information around the implementation of its ideals.

## Ben Deane biography

I wrote this piece at the age of 23 while studying in the Master of Teaching and Learning programme University of Waikato student. I am now 27 and have been teaching Geography and in the Junior School

at Fraser High School in Hamilton, New Zealand. It is now four years since this analysis of the NZC, and I still agree with many of the points I made. However, there are parts of this piece that I feel need expansion and clarification as my ideas have developed and refined over my short teaching career. I hope you find my critique insightful and it prompts you to look beneath the surface of our curriculum.

### Reference list

- Apple, M. (2015). Examinations, inequality, and curriculum reform. *Educational Policy*, 29(7), 1076–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814531654>
- Berryman, M., Nevin, A., SooHoo, S., & Ford, T. (Eds.). (2015). *Relational and responsive inclusion contexts for becoming and belonging*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1547-9>
- Education Review Office. (2016) *Promoting success for Māori students schools' progress*. <http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/promoting-success-for-maori-students-schools-progress/>
- Giovanni, T., & Hilary, S. (2016). Education for everyone? *Public Sector*, 39(1), 20–21.
- Hunter, P. (2011). History in the New Zealand curriculum: Discourse shaping and key competencies possibilities. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 12(1), 5–11. <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v12i1.25>
- Koh, C. (2015). *Motivation, leadership and curriculum design*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-230-2>
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in Years 1–13*.
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.). *Choosing a course or subject at school*. <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/secondary-school-and-ncea/choosing-a-course-or-subjects-at-school/>
- O'Neill, A.-M., Clark, J., & Openshaw, R. (2004). Mapping the field: An introduction to curriculum politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In A.-M. O'Neill, J. Clark, & R. Openshaw (Eds.), *Reshaping culture, knowledge & learning: Policy and content in the New Zealand curriculum framework* (pp. 25–46). Dunmore Press.
- Stace, H. (2007). The long unfinished journey towards human rights for disabled persons in New Zealand. *Human Rights Research*, 5(1), 2–13.
- Teese, R. (2013). *Academic success and social power: Examinations and inequality*. Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.