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THE CURRICULUM AND THE EQUITY MYTH[i]

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The Foreword of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (*NZC*) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) boldly declares "the New Zealand Curriculum is a clear statement of what we deem important in education. It takes as its starting point a vision of our young people as lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved" (p. 4). The nature of the *NZC* is political, and its tone from the Foreword to the Learning Areas is around the notion of creating citizens of New Zealand who are desired and needed for the future of our country. Therefore, the "curriculum needs to be read as a politically motivated process, and interpreted as a statement of policy decisions that signal desired educational outcomes" (Hunter, 2011, p. 6).

While the context of citizenship is not a defined curriculum learning area or subject, "the notion of 'education for citizenship' is covered in both an aspirational manner through visions, values, goals and principles, and in a practical manner through the key competencies and recommended pedagogical approaches" (Mutch, 2009, as cited in Mutch, 2011, p. 183). The *NZC* as defined in its Foreword is "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). And with this 21st century focus, the *NZC* is positioned as "more appropriate for a diverse range of learners because it enables teachers to connect to and access the different experiences, interests and understandings of a wider range of learners than those in the dominant culture" (Collins & Clarke, 2008, as cited in Boyd, 2013, p. 5).

Abbiss (2013) states that 21st century learning is synonymous with "visionary thinking and desirable educational goals" (p. 6). The words in the *NZC* used to portray what is desirable for the 21st century learner, and therefore shapes what is believed to be important and needed in our society, are *lifelong learning*, *confident, connected*, *actively involved*, *critical thinking*, *collaborative* and *enterprising*. These 21st century learners are defined as inclusive, future focused, diverse and able to "seize the opportunities offered by new knowledge and technologies to secure a sustainable social, cultural, economic, and environmental future for our country" (MoE, 2007, p. 8). The *NZC* Vision notes being "international citizens" with a strong theme of participation and contribution, integrity and excellence (p. 8). Are all of these things attributes that can be grown, built upon and practised? Or do some of them come down to who we are at our core, our natural-born dispositions? Can we really expect all learners to have these qualities and dispositions?

The curriculum's placing of importance on who the learners need to be to be successful citizens for the future of our country rather than what they need to know "is seen by some to be sinister, with overtones of indoctrination and totalitarianism" (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014, p. 52). Is it the place of the government and schools to be teaching our children who they should be? Along this line of thought, I draw on Foucault's (1991) view that "political, economic and social government operates continuously and invisibly through … administration and management in institutions such as schools" (cited in O'Neill, 2016, p. 598) as some form of population management control. Who has the power in determining what is important for our future? Mutch (2013) raises some important questions around

[i] Editor's note: The first of five articles written by beginning teachers about the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC, MoE, 2007) reprinted in their 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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knowledge by asking: "What knowledge is worthwhile? What are the current and future needs of society and how should we meet these? How are knowledge, skills, and attitudes best transmitted to the next generation? Different ideological positions produce different responses" (p. 55). So, who has the final say?

With the *NZC* there will always be questions around political agenda, power, motives and influence, what the hidden and null curriculum are, questions around oppression and marginalisation. But it may be argued that despite all of these factors, the overall intention of the *NZC* is for the good of our students and therefore our country. However, two main areas of concern echo in my mind. Firstly, what about the people in our society who do not seem to fit the criteria for success. Does that make them any less valuable learners and citizens? Secondly, I believe there will always be issues around implementation and interpretation by individuals who have their own, as well as collective, motivations, aspirations, life views and value systems. This leaves a great deal of room for variation that will lead to deviations away from what was originally intended. How is that equity?

NZC discourses, language, and learning areas

Constructivist theory can be seen in the national curriculum's commitment to building upon the learner's prior experiences and culture(s) to reinforce that a student's knowledge is constructed (Hunter, 2011; Lin, 2015). This theory is seen expressed in the curriculum by the scaffolding of the Achievement Objectives and also in statements such as "students learn best when they are able to integrate new learning with what they already understand" (MoE, 2007, p. 34). The curriculum is constructivist in the way it is encouraging "the development of deep understandings of concepts" (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014, p. 54). This is evidenced by repeated emphasis placed on inquiry learning whereby students are encouraged to have real-life experiences to reinforce and bring depth to the learning through being invested in the process (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008, as cited in Boyd, 2013).

The influence of sociocultural theory is seen in ways the curriculum is designed to use the social context(s) of the learner, taking into account the child's historical background and experiences, including cultural and economic. This theory sees children as bringing funds of knowledge with them, that learning is a social process and that social interaction and context is a vital component (Barnard & Campbell, 2005; Hogg, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). This theory can be seen in the conceptual framework that "gives schools the scope, flexibility, and authority they need to design and shape their curriculum so that teaching and learning is meaningful and beneficial to their particular communities of students" (MoE, 2007, p. 37). As well as the learner's own funds of knowledge, the involvement of both their whānau and the wider community is seen as an important aspect in the successful education of our 21st century learners (MoE, 2007; 2012).

While constructivist and sociocultural theories are, I believe, two main theories that influence and shape the *NZC*, there is also a strong foundation of the learner-centred pedagogical approach. The learner-centred approach can be seen throughout the *NZC* and links to both constructivist and sociocultural thinking in that students are recognised as bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience with them, and should be met where they are at. There are also strong tones of social justice with statements such as "all New Zealand students, regardless of where they are situated, should experience a rich and balanced education that embraces the intent of the national curriculum" in the *NZC* (MoE, 2007, p. 37). This is further reinforced by the Values and Principles that speak to diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism.

While the *NZC* is a discourse for education and society in and of itself, it also provides insight into the many discourses that are at play inside the New Zealand educational system "as language and voices that compete noisily with each other" (Hunter, 2011, p. 7). I believe the language is conceptual rather than prescriptive. It is emotive rather than factual and it is persuasive rather than dictatorial. While the Principles are described in the *NZC* (MoE, 2007) as foundational in the planning and "all school decision making" (p. 9), the Values are "to be encouraged, modelled, and explored" (p. 10). The language used on the Values page of the curriculum, positions them as flexible, open to school

interpretation and fluid. However, by listing a set of Values and stating that they "enjoy widespread support because it is by holding these values and acting on them that we are able to live together and thrive" the curriculum appears to be allocating values for society (MoE, 2007, p. 10).

This kind of implicit communication is seen further in the Learning Areas where I believe bias comes through in what is seen as politically valuable. The *NZC* explicitly states: "All learning should make use of the natural connections that exist between learning areas and that link learning areas to the values and key competencies" (MoE, 2007, p. 16). However, a conflict can be seen in the curriculum: "A tension exists between curriculum policy that supports learning across a range of learning areas, including social sciences, and educational policy that places strong emphasis on generic skills, which includes core literacy and numeracy skills in primary schooling" (Abbiss, 2013, p. 13). In my own experiences, I have seen this played out in the classroom many times as literacy and numeracy are given the main stage time and again.

While analysing the learning areas, I noticed that the only area that uses the word 'success' is English, in stating that "success in English is fundamental to success across the curriculum" (MoE, 2007, p. 18). I also noticed that while they are not ranked explicitly in order of importance, English is the first of the Learning Areas which, in my view, reinforces its tacit status. English is the only Learning Area that uses strong language about being a successful citizen: "Literacy in English 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). The other two areas I felt used stronger language, although not as robust as the English area, were technology and science with maths not too far behind. I found that the arts, health and physical education, social sciences and languages all use gentle, more emotive language that stay well away from notions of success and entrepreneurialism. For me this was evidence of the "discursive and political regimes" that position the STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects as "more relevant for industry, employment and national economic prosperity" (Abbiss, 2013, p. 12).

Curriculum structure and key competencies

I suggest that the *NZC* is the hands of the Education Act 1989 and the National Education Goals (MoE, 2004) as the 'how to' of the education policy. They do not determine the exact *what* but instead provide a framework intended to guide conceptual, learner-centred, inquiry focused education that is to be tailored by each school to fit the needs of its learners and the community it operates within (MoE, 2007).

To understand the structure of the curriculum, I liken it to a quilt. The Vision would be identified as the foundational backing that the quilt is built upon, holding all the parts together and providing strength and unity. I see the Principles as being the batting, also foundational but built on top of the vision and providing texture and depth. The Learning Areas and the Achievement Objectives are fabrics that are varied and many, every learner taking a different path, learning different things, choosing different fabrics that all result in an individualised and unique pattern, vibrant and alive with colour. The Values I believe to be the thread that is woven throughout, binding the parts together as one. The Key Competencies are the border for the quilt. They frame the learning, highlighting knowledge and providing the anchor on which the learning is based. While this may be an overly simplistic view of the structure of the curriculum, it is one that helps me make sense of the complex interwoven parts that make the whole.

Key competencies are learner-centred and constructivist in nature and viewed as the "key to learning in every learning area" (Hunter, 2011; MoE, 2007, p. 12). They are the overarching skills, attitudes, dispositions and capabilities that might be seen as politically, socially and economically essential to success in learning and life (Hunter, 2011). The message that is clear from the language used around the Key Competencies is that in order to be a successful citizen and active member of the community here in New Zealand and globally, a student needs to be competent and capable in these five key areas of *thinking*, *using language, symbols and texts*, *managing self*, *relating to others* and *participating and contributing* (MoE, 2007, p. 12). Their place of importance is made explicitly clear by statements such

as "people use these competencies to live, learn, work, and contribute as active members of their communities" and "successful learners make use of the competencies" (MoE, 2007, p. 12). I suggest the Key Competencies are the bones of the curriculum, positioned as vital for successful learning across all areas as "an end in itself (a goal) and the means by which other ends are achieved" (MoE, 2007, p. 12). The government expresses its expectations of our students through the Key Competencies that position students as intellectually curious, seeking, creating, and using knowledge through reflection and questioning. Students are conceived as confident and self-motivated, open and aware and collaborative communicators who are actively involved connectors (MoE, 2007). These words are powerful, aspirational and inspiring, and somewhat overwhelming! I ask: What of those who do not have the natural dispositions that are in line with these? What of those students who do not fit with, or who are not disposed to, these competencies?

Outcomes and pedagogy

The *NZC* is an outcomes-based curriculum with Achievement Objectives that are measurable as well as the added National Standards for literacy and numeracy for the first eight years of schooling (MoE, 2010), and the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) for years 11–13 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], n.d.). While the 2007 *NZC* seemed to bring a mostly applauded freedom to our education system, this was then countered by the constraints of a national standards system (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014). I believe the influence of the growing importance of international assessments in education has been significant in the revised *NZC* as the government is "under constant pressure to operate at the international level, to justify their national decisions against the background of international assessments" (Martens et al., 2016, p. 517). Therefore, it has become increasingly important to have an outcomes-based curriculum to be a respected member of the global community (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014). Understandably, assessment is positioned in the *NZC* as a valuable tool in the learning process by stating that "assessment is integral to the teaching inquiry process" and its "primary purpose … is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching as both student and teacher respond to the information that it provides" (MoE, 2007, p. 39).

Does the *NZC* shape pedagogies? Ongoing curriculum revision continues to work on the premise that any changes in the curriculum are immediately followed by changes in the classrooms. However, "classrooms have their own inherent structures composed of interactions between teachers and students" (Doyle, 1992, as cited in Carr et al., 2010, p. 38). So perhaps the power of curriculum policy on pedagogies is not as influential as it is believed to be. Not surprisingly, the influence of nationalised assessment on pedagogy has proven to be significant and "often contrary to the spirit of the curriculum or the assessment" (Carr et al., 2010, p. 55). In my own experiences, as mentioned earlier, I have witnessed the impact of the National Standards with literacy and maths predominantly featuring to the detriment of the other learning areas in the *NZC*. I have also experienced through my children's education the secondary school tendency to teach to the test for the NCEA, rather than the conceptual inquiry-based learning the *NZC* promotes.

I suggest that assessment practices more than curriculum policy influences pedagogy as well as the significance of the implemented classroom curriculum. My concern is that because of the subjective nature of the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum framework, it seems as though it will be virtually impossible to achieve consistent learning for all students in New Zealand. Some students will be advantaged, while others will be disadvantaged. This goes against the very purpose of the *NZC* conceptual framework. Boyd's research (2013) reinforced my concern by showing an inconsistent approach to how the *NZC* is implemented, and that some schools and teachers are "more aligned than others with the characteristics of 21st-century learning" (p. 10).

Teachers are human and therefore influenced by their own values, ideals and experiences. Their pedagogies are shaped by differing and conflicting discourses. As individuals and colleagues, teachers' "discourses are maintained by ideas and beliefs about knowledge, pedagogy, and cultural notions" which are further reinforced through day-to-day practices and classroom curriculum (Hunter, 2011, p.

7). The somewhat frightening reality is that as teachers, "what we do [or do not do] in response to policy developments and in everyday pedagogy … is instrumental in either legitimating the status quo and its consequences, or challenging it" (Penney, 2011, p. 10). So the question has to be asked: Is it even possible for the *NZC* to achieve equity in the New Zealand education system given it deals with living and breathing teachers and students? And more importantly for me is how will I reconcile the differences and stay true to who I am as a person, and who I want to be as a teacher? The only answer I have right now is that I just do not know.

Kelly Davis biography

Kelly is mother to three daughters, grandmother to two nearly three, in her words, "gorgeous delights" and wife of Rob for nearly 23 years. Along with a Bachelor of Business Analysis (Fin.) majoring in accounting, she holds a Masters in Teaching & Learning, both qualifications from the University of Waikato. Kelly has had a varied career path having been an accountant for nearly 15 years and beginning her primary teaching career which was interrupted by the death of her mother. She now helps Rob with both the accounting and guiding work in their business, Waitomo Caves Zipline Park. Kelly is an avid crafter who loves knitting and quilting and has recently become addicted to wheel thrown pottery. Kelly loves spending time with family and friends and their pup Tilly, and is always keen for a coffee and some good chats.

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