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Contents

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Notes for Contributors

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.

This peer reviewed journal welcomes papers on any of these from tertiary staff and students, teachers and other educators who have a special interest in curriculum matters. Papers on research may be full papers, or if time or space is at a premium, research notes, that is a 2,000 word summary.

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There has been perhaps no greater admission of the general failure of schooling in New Zealand than the Schools Plus programme, which essentially proposes that apprenticeship-type programmes should be made available to students as young as 13. Released close on the heels of the newly introduced national curriculum, it seems to be a form of official recognition that the newly crafted curriculum has little or no relevance to large numbers of secondary school students. The proponents of Schools Plus believe that this relevance can be achieved by allowing young people to partly join the workforce ("Incentives yes, but not compulsion", 2008). As an admission of failure it tops the 2007 idea from NZQA that a good way to motivate and challenge our brightest was to offer merit and excellence stickers on NCEA records because the work that students do at this level has little intrinsic interest or reward for even our brightest youth.

Education for the present

What passes for education in school is predicated on a "futures focused curriculum". What students are required to learn today is based on what curriculum writers consider young people need in the future. For a number of years I was involved as a writer of the new curriculum statement on the arts, and attended a number of fora on the new futures focused curriculum. At one forum participants were asked to list the most significant changes in the last few years and how these would impact on the future. The usual suspects of technological advances, demographic shift, and changing employment structures were rolled out. These are now translated in the curriculum document as exploring "sustainability, citizenship, enterprise and globalization" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). I suggested at the forum that one of the biggest shifts since September 2001 was in the way in which the world now lived under a cloak of fear. I proposed that we live in a world where young people were increasingly fearful and, paradoxically, were also feared. How we might work with these issues now, rather than focusing on preparing people for a *future* when none of us could have predicted our *present,* seemed to me to be the vital question. I think I was easily dismissed as an arty farty type.

What I want to suggest, however, is that if we were focused on the now we might recognise that education is not just about giving information for what teachers of today consider the future might be, but it would also be about helping young people to sort through the conflicting, confusing ambiguities that threaten our present. Education, when it deals with the now, can help give sense and meaning to living when, at times, such a task for many of our young seems increasingly senseless and meaningless. Perhaps this is what School Plus recognises. Thirteen-year-olds who are switched off from education need to engage in something that is meaningful for them in the present, so that they might get to the future.

A futures focused curriculum makes an assumption that we can ask students to forget the meaninglessness of the present, and to excuse the irrelevance of what we offer them in our schools today, by telling them it will be good for them in the future, if it ever comes. The day my daughter started school I asked what she hoped to learn about. She told me two things. "I want to know how blood works, and I want to know where I was before you and mummy made me." She dropped science before the school teachers got to blood (and her mother and I got the books for her anyway, and we had looked and learned together). Of course, the existential question of who and where we are in the cosmic sense of our origins is still something she and we all question. However, she was so proud of telling me at the end of the first week that she had learnt the other word for learning--listening. And, although she could read and write and numerate already, she spent large chunks of time learning it again and again and again.

The New Zealand curriculum talks about high expectations. It is described as one of the foundations of

curriculum decision making (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.9). I assume though that this relates to the expectations teachers have of their students. It is one of the tragedies of schooling, in my experience, that by the time many young people get to secondary school they have very low expectations of doing anything that is of significant value to their lives now. Despite years of curriculum change, the "whining school-boy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school", as William Shakespeare described it in *As You Like It*, is as true now as it was then. If you never or rarely get what you need in the present, then the future always feels a long way away.

A friend of mine had her grandson start school last year. An active boy, when asked what he had learnt in his first week he was lucky enough to say he had learned the key competency of "sitting still". I despair that he will spend large amounts of time learning this competency again and again, and again. I wondered, as he started back at school this year, what his high expectations are? Without demeaning its worth, as we focus endlessly in our schools on literacy and numeracy, we risk forgetting the context of living in a world at the end of its tether.

As Dorothy Heathcote (1984) noted, schooling should not be about a rehearsal for a future that may never arrive (Johnson & O'Neill, 1984). Instead, as Philip Taylor (2000) has suggested, it should be about asking the question "what is happening to me now?" This important question seems to sit within the whole notion of the development of key competencies for life. And to it I would offer "How and why is it happening, and what might I do to change that?"

Key competencies and education for now

If the competencies we have in our new curriculum were present focused rather than future focused they would be significantly different. When terrorist organisations seek future terrorists I imagine that they look for people with a range of skills and attributes. These terrorists share key competencies. I would imagine that terrorist organisations want thinkers - people who can problem solve, actively seek, use and create knowledge - and they certainly want them to "ask questions and challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions" that underpin the hegemonic structures of society" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.12). Planned attacks can be hugely imaginative and creative. Certainly, "intellectual curiosity is at the heart of this competency" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.12).

They need to be competent users of language, symbols, and texts in order to recognise how "choices of language, symbol or text affect people's understanding" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.12). Comprehending the power of the metaphor of "September 11" and attacks on subways has already proved to be a useful competence.

The very nature of any terrorist organisation means that terrorists would need to be able to manage themselves, to be "enterprising, resourceful, reliable and resilient. They have strategies for meeting challenges. They would need to know when to lead, when to follow and when and how to act independently" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.12).

As part of a small team such persons need to relate to others as they recognise different points of view and they can come up with new approaches, ideas, and ways of thinking (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.12). And of course these organisations need people prepared to participate and contribute either locally, nationally, or globally. This will give them a "sense of belonging and confidence to participate within new contexts" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.13).

So, it could be said that the key competencies in the New Zealand national curriculum are certainly useful for creating terrorists. Such a ludicrous statement suggests to me that if there is one key competency missing in our curriculum it is *empathy*. If a competency is more complex than skills and also draws on knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action, then I would argue that this competency (i.e., empathy) is the most important and central competency of all.

Yet readers of the 2007 document will find that among all the words used to describe learning in the new curriculum the term empathy appears only once. It is mentioned within the value statements as students explore, with empathy, the values of others. No achievement objectives encompass or embrace it.

Empathy at the centre

I agree with Ian McEwan (2001) that empathy—the ability to think and feel what it might be like to be other than yourself—sits at the centre of morality and that it is the most important competency for a world living under the threats of terrorism and its response. For, without empathy, we can strap packs on our backs and blow up innocent people on subways. Without empathy we can attack mosques and Jewish cemeteries in Auckland and stab innocent people walking along a road. Without empathy we can demand tax cuts for the rich at a time when the gap between the rich and poor widens. In its absence, people can justify the torturing of their enemies and the use of depleted uranium and burning phosphorus on civilian populations. Rather than trying to make sense of life in the twenty-first century we can make it a non sense.

So, what would a "*now*-focused curriculum" look like? If empathy is recognised as being of vital importance for now then the arts and, more particularly, drama would sit at its centre.

This would mean exploring with empathy not merely the values of others but also the world itself. We would then be able to walk several miles in the shoes of many other people. With drama at its core, education would be essentially about the creation of actors—not actors for the stage but social actors who would have the agency to act on the world rather than remain spectators within it. Because what we do in arts education is to use process to determine outcomes, rather than use or pursue outcomes to determine process, we would gladly accept that we may not know what we will achieve before we begin teaching.

The new curriculum is predicated on the rational notion that clearly defined ends determine the means by which they will be attained. Of course, if the ends are not attained then new means are devised but the ends are held sacrosanct and never changing. This, for technicians and government bureaucrats, makes learning neat and tidy, linear and predictable. Indeed, it is so predictable that a teacher can begin a lesson by telling the class what they will learn (am I the only one that finds "learning intentions" demeaning?), defining the intentions, and then having taught them successfully, he or she can "measure, discuss and chart progress" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.39). The artistry of teaching is replaced with a technicist technical/tehcnician's approach which makes it mind-numbingly boring for everyone involved.

John Dewey (1934) recognised that the arts allowed for what he termed "flexible purposing". By this he fully understood that the arts allow for an opportunistic capitalising on what emerges from the work rather than an adherence to predetermined aims. The aims might and should shift as the work creates new ends. Perhaps we will not need to have points or credits as the motivation for learning if the learning itself has inherent motivations and ends.

Elliot Eisner (2002, p.206) has suggested that rather than mapping learning accurately we should open classrooms and learners more readily to the pursuit of *surprise*, in order for pupils to see their work as "temporary experimental accomplishments, temporary resting places subject to further change."

In my teaching practice over twenty-five years it is exactly this opening up to learners of new and flexible processes, especially in drama, that has marked and characterised deep learning. A number of examples might help to clarify what a now-focused curriculum might look like in practice. In a room of twenty Year 7 and 8 students, over half were recent refugee migrants with limited English language skills. The rest of the students were second-generation Pacific Islanders. All were young men. We were using drama to explore the issues of family violence. I played the role of Bernie, a twelve-year-old in the story of a play they had seen who is beaten by his mother and who in turn beats his younger sister. Hot-seated in front of the students I said very little, with eyes downcast and sullenly ignoring their questions. My withholding of information, so unusual for a teacher, and yet reasonable within the role, had the desired effect of drawing the students into the drama and the story. I came out of role, and asked the students why they thought Bernie would not talk to them. One student said it was because Bernie does not know them and so he did not trust them with his problems. I asked what they thought they could do to help him gain their trust. One young man said that maybe they could sing Bernie a song. The pupils got a guitar from the corner of the room, closed around Bernie and sang in perfect harmony: "Lean on me, When you're not strong, I'll lend a hand to carry on."

I had not planned for the students to sing. When I had asked the students what they could do to make a twelve-year-old trust them it was a genuine question. It is one that, as a teacher, I have often wondered about. The answer to the question was revealed simply and powerfully for us all through the group's singing. As an example of process drama it illustrates the power inherent in this aesthetic pedagogy.

Yet this kind of work is increasingly difficult for classroom teachers. I can undertake it because I work in a theatre-in-education programme where teachers' expectations are low in relation to what we will do. This freedom from curricular expectation allows us not to have to clearly define to classes what they will learn. It allows us to move freely with what students bring to the work and not to have to measure and chart "progress". We can actively seek out ways in which we and the students are surprised by what we find out.

I have never focused on or mastered learning intentions, but I imagine for this lesson they would be:

> *I can use music to break down layers of mistrust with difficult and troubled young people.*
>
> *I can make my teacher weep with the beauty of what I have created.*

A "merit" label would mean having students being able to do this consistently, while an "excellence" sticker would be given if the pupil did it and could justify the choice of music.

Unfortunately, however, I did not know that this is what we might find out when we started. In some assessment theory apparently, I would not be allowed to assess what we had learnt anyway because I had not signalled from the outset what we were going to learn.

In terms of key competencies, what boxes might we tick? I believe all the boxes, especially the one concerning relating to others. Yet, where might we find in the curriculum statement the notion of emotional intelligence, of the empathetic relationship developed between all of us?

Using the same drama with a different class, I discovered that there was a boy who appeared to be taking no interest in the day's events. However, as hot-seating continued, he worked his way up to the front of the class to ask "Helen" if she loves her son, Bernie. As Helen, the only answer I could give was "Yes". Satisfied with this answer the boy returned to the back of the classroom, where he again appeared to be disengaged. But the one question he needed answering, most likely for himself, had been answered.

I remember another occasion when we worked in a school health camp where a young boy, placed in the health camp as respite for his family because he suffered from a brain tumour, sat in the hot seat as Helen. When this "Helen" was asked "Do you think you deserve your children?", the young boy answered "No, but I deserve a break".

Conclusion

The curriculum seems to represent yet another mountain of words that gets in the way of this valuable approach to learning and teaching. The picture provided by the curriculum is so neat and tidy, and achingly predictable. Ends are spelt out in precise terms, external motivators are put in place, and literacy and numeracy tasks come to dominate everything. All are designed for a future, while the present remains so elusive to understand and to make sense of. The arts statement in the curriculum, for example, sticks resolutely to a notion that the arts are merely modes of expression. In the two pages on the arts, the term "expression" or something similar is used nine times. The sense that they might alter who we are and be transformative of not merely how we see the world but also the world itself is confined to the expressive arts. This is safer and more predictable, and is geared—as the curriculum notes—so that students can in the future "contribute their vision, abilities and energies to arts initiatives and creative industries" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.21). Unfortunately the transformative and energising potential of the arts is reduced to preparing—in line with the focus behind rest of the document—happy, competent workers.

If it is true that much of what we learn that sustains us in later life we learn before we get to school, then we need to acknowledge that much of that is learnt through imagined play. This is where we act as if we are someone other than ourselves. My great consolation to drama not being taught or used as pedagogy in school is that children, until they are about nine or ten years of age, spend more time doing drama than anything else. Drama takes place not in the classroom but at play time and lunch time when pupils get up from behind their desks, put their numeracy and literacy tasks away, and run outside and become astronauts, doctors, soldiers, builders, and All Blacks in the playground. They experience being in wonderful worlds of the imagination. If we could harness that energy and desire and the joy of learning through play and bring it into the classroom, if we used the energy that young people bring to sorting out their own worlds through the arts, then we might survive our present and arrive at a future in which we might all delight in living.

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