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An introduction to the Special Issue: The Arts will find a way: Breaking through and moving forward

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Special Issue Editors: Claire Coleman and Bronya Dean

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It gives me great pleasure to introduce the second special issue in our series, *Promoting a broad curriculum*:

THE ARTS WILL FIND A WAY: BREAKING THROUGH AND MOVING FORWARD

Edited by Claire Coleman and Bronya Dean

In this issue, Claire Coleman and Bronya Dean ask that educators take another look at the Arts in the school curriculum, to reflect on the present and move forward with a sense of direction and intention. John Berger wrote, “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach—though not necessarily within arm’s reach ... We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (1972, pp. 8–9). Many would argue that as individuals, groups, communities, and societies, as “ourselves”, human beings need the arts. Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, for example, proposed that “art is a therapeutic medium that can help us guide, exhort and console” (2013, p. 5), enabling viewers, readers, consumers and producers to become better versions of themselves through extending our psychological capabilities. Specifically, the seven capacities proposed are to remember, hope, feel sorrow, rebalance, develop self-understanding, and experience growth and appreciation. The authors characterise these seven capabilities as functions of art (2013).

The aim for this series is to provide teachers and school leaders with accessible material to support teaching and learning across the breadth of Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum subject areas. In other words, to “promote a broad curriculum”. We seek through issues in this series to rekindle the spark of teachers’ enthusiasm, knowledge, skills and practice in teaching of curriculum subjects beyond literacy and mathematics.

As educators and school leaders, we can be helped to see opportunities and possibilities within and for change by sources of information, guidance and support. We also need imagination:

Imagination—the potential to see beyond the immediate in order to open new possibilities—is a crucial aspect of a living worker. When the imaginative spirit is honoured, then students may be more willingly motivated to connect passionately with their learning, engaging their whole self. Jim Garrison [1997] says, ‘people who do not blaze with their own passions burn out’. The pursuit of dispassionate and depersonalised outcomes, however, channels students into the unimaginative, disengages them from the imaginative and, in turn, disconnects them from valuing their own self. Such disconnectedness, I suggest, is an essential explanation of lack of motivation and a fundamental source of student stress ... Imagination is an expression of our desire to create and comprehend. Central to imagination is the capacity to dwell and engage in the arts. It is in and through the arts that we are able to construct knowledge and multiple meanings through imagery, symbols, metaphors and rituals. (Gibbs, 2014, pp. 196–197)

On the other hand, “narrowing of curriculum” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jerald, 2006; Manzo, 2005; Meyer, 2005) describes the outcomes that increased standardisation and high stakes accountability have on what is taught and learned in schools. The narrowing of the curriculum particularly refers to the erosion of time spent on other school subjects (e.g., physical education, science, social studies, and the arts) due to increased time and attention on literacy (reading and writing) and mathematics. Putting aside systemic socio-economic contexts and broader government policy, issues such as external pressures on educators, Jerald (2006) pointed to teachers’ and school leaders’ decision-making:

[E]ducators should be made aware that cutting too deeply into social studies, science, and the arts imposes significant long-term costs on students, hampers reading comprehension and

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thinking skills, increases inequity, and makes the job of secondary level teachers that much harder. (p. 5)

A narrowing of the curriculum is just one of the harms of education reforms based on the use of generic standards across schools and communities along with high stakes accountability for the educational progress and achievement of children. Such reforms have already been clearly signalled as harmful in education contexts, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (see for example, Berliner, 2009; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Manzo, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Harms identified in research also include limiting local curriculum initiatives, limiting learning for learners from poorer families, increased assessment, increased workload for teachers and students (and making it more like work than learning), undermining the expertise and professional judgement of teachers, negatively shaping teacher practice and impacting on teacher-student relationships, and impacting on school policy and public relations through school performance reporting and public records.

Standards and accountability assessments go together and, of particular concern, are mandated: standardised, commercially produced assessments such as those used in the United States and the United Kingdom. Wiliam (2003) questions the design of such assessments and the decisions made based on test results. One of his concerns revolves around the way commercially made tests undermine the expert knowledge of teachers:

The failure to use the detailed knowledge that teachers have about their students impoverishes the quality of the summative assessment (and, in particular, makes it less reliable and diminishes validity). In other words, while teachers may not demand to be involved in summative assessment, good summative assessment demands the involvement of teachers. (Wiliam, 2003, p. 132)

Although New Zealand's National Standards policy (2010–2017) did not involve a required national test, the impact of the enactment of these standards demonstrated much of the concerns that had been predicted. Thrupp and White found that during that period:

National Standards are having some favourable impacts in areas that include teacher understanding of curriculum levels, motivation of some teachers and children and some improved targeting of interventions. Nevertheless, such gains are overshadowed by damage being done through the intensification of staff workloads, curriculum narrowing and the reinforcement of a two-tier curriculum, the positioning and labelling of children and unproductive new tensions amongst school staff. These problems are often occurring despite attempts by schools and teachers to minimise any damaging impact of the National Standards. (2013, p. i)

In an Ipu Kererū blog, Thrupp (2017) recognised this policy's effects had become naturalised.

Even though most teachers and principals did not like the impact of the National Standards policy, after a decade of its influence New Zealand primary schools are now marinated in the thinking, language, and expectations of the National Standards. This has also had wider impacts, for instance on early childhood education. It will all take a little while to undo.

It's great, though, that New Zealand primary schools will now be able to spend less time shoring up judgements about children – judgements that have often been pointless or harmful – and instead spend more time making learning relevant and interesting for each child. Removing National Standards should also allow teachers to be less burdened, contributing to making teaching a more attractive career again.

In light of these insights into the negative effects of National Standards implementation, the Editor, Editorial Board and the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER) are pleased to publish a series of special issues of *Teachers and Curriculum* titled *Promoting a broad curriculum* with the aim of promoting the “other” curriculum subjects, while at the same time providing useful

professional learning for school leaders and teachers to continue to restore the richness of a broad curriculum and the pleasure of learning and teaching.

To emphasise the importance of the arts to human beings and our humanity, I conclude with another quote: “The arts dig into the inner life, and their spiritual function is irreplaceable. They not only activate our senses but let us live fully in this world by awakening—through the creative spirit—the human spirit” (Holland, 1998, as cited in Gibbs 2014, p. 197).

Because the Arts are so important, *Teachers and Curriculum* are publishing another Arts Special Issue in 2022. Do look out for our next issue:

The arts in the classroom: Advocacy, theory and practice

Edited by Millie Locke, Robyn Ewing and Terry Locke

Remember to also check out the first issue in this series:

Quality STEM Education

Edited by Elizabeth Reinsfield, Chris Eames and Wendy Fox-Turnbull

If you would like to edit a special issue in this series, please contact me or access guidance on the journal website (<https://wje.org.nz/index.php/WJE/about>).

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