

# Teachers and Curriculum



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# TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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It includes articles about curriculum issues, research in the area of curriculum and informed curriculum practice. Reviews of curriculum related books may also be included.

The Opinion item is contributed by a leading New Zealand educationalist.

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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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## REFLECTIONS ON THE STANDARDS

DR DAVID MCKENZIE

Recently, as I was reviewing a newly published history of NZEI–Otago (Knudsen, 2009), I realised again the force of the successful battle that was once fought by teachers, school committees, and education boards in early 20th century New Zealand to free the primary schools from the incubus of annual external examinations. This was not done to make life easier for teachers. It was done because it had come to be realised that the blight of the examination system had stifled the development of better learning and teaching in the classrooms. Thus it is not surprising to find that many teachers and Boards of Trustees are less than enthusiastic about the government's decision to reintroduce testing each child's performance in the primary schools against national standards in literacy and numeracy. National standards per se are not the problem. Schools are familiar with the concept, and the majority of schools are used to measuring the progress of individual pupils against several benchmark tests that are currently available. What bothers teachers and Boards, however, is the likelihood of league tables being published in the media; league tables in which schools will be compared with one another on the basis of their collective annual examination results. This is a possibility which brings with it some very unpleasant memories in the folk lore of New Zealand teaching.

The government claims that it is not interested in, and will do nothing to create, league tables. But this is either not true or it is fanciful. The practice of annual testing, and publicly reporting the results of such testing, carries with it a philosophy of shaming and blaming those schools with 'results' that are not as good as those of others. It is indeed reminiscent of the extremist market philosophies that were proposed by the New Zealand Treasury in the mid 1980s. Somehow it is believed that a public knowledge of test results will serve as a whip to spur on the learning behaviour of both learners and teachers, and so eradicate the problem of poor performance. Nice rhetoric perhaps. But there is precious little evidence that testing with this motivation in mind has had any success in the past. Many years ago Mrs Thatcher introduced a tests regime like this into the primary schools in the United Kingdom. She had no doubt that league tables based on 'results' would raise the quality of teaching and learning therein. Mr Tony Blair was even more sure that testing and test results would place the schools back in the hands of the people. But here is the situation now. The tests regime has been abandoned in Wales and Scotland, and that same regime has been drastically modified in England. There is also clear evidence that the effect of league table testing in the UK has narrowed the curriculum offered in the schools as teachers and principals have concentrated their instruction on producing the all-important examination results. In New Zealand, Professor Terry Crooks of the University of Otago National Schools Monitoring Project has expressed his further concern that a league table environment might well encourage teachers to concentrate their energies on teaching the middle and lower achieving pupils at the expense of extending higher achievers. All in all it is not a good look.

It has been said that, unlike the case in some countries, New Zealand parents would not be carried away with the competitive ethos of league table test results. I wish I could be so sure. Having seen how interest groups in this country have behaved in earlier generations, and bearing in mind the financial circumstances of the times, my guess sadly is that the urge to judge schools by their 'results' would be more likely to be led by parents from the tree-lined suburbs of Remuera, Karori, Fendalton, and Maori Hill than by those from the populous areas of South Auckland or the more marginal hinterland districts. Nor as it stands is there any guarantee that the reality of school underachievement in literacy and numeracy will be addressed by a tests regime. By international comparisons, New Zealand

primary school pupils as a group score well in basic learning, but it is the case that there is a considerable tail of underachievers. And it is improvement among this group which is a target that should be our immediate and urgent aim. If we were to use test results data, which we already have, to determine the areas of greatest need, we might I hope look forward to seeing a government policy which by working with teachers and Boards would seek to direct extra resources to the places where they are required. This would not be a cheap option. Much would have to be invested to develop remedial programmes, and in straitened financial times this means that fewer resources would be available for other desirable educational developments. The pay-off would be, however, that the government would *really* be seen to be promoting equitable educational opportunity for all, and to be doing so with the support and goodwill of teachers and school Boards. Could we really do this? In the inspired rhetoric of Barack Obama, "Yes we can."

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#### **REFERENCE**

Knudsen, D. (2009). *NZEI-Otago: The history of the New Zealand Educational Institute in Otago*. Dunedin: Otago Branch of the New Zealand Educational Institute.