

Teachers and Curriculum



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

VOLUME 10 2007



TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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EDITORIAL

Catherine Lang 3

OPINION

Reflections on educational change in New Zealand
Noeline Alcorn 5

Four Māori girls and mathematics: What can we learn from them?
Marilyn Taylor, Ngarewa Hawera, Jenny Young-Loveridge & Sashi Sharma 9

Is the PROBE reading assessment an effective measure of reading
comprehension?
Qin Chen & Ken E. Blaiklock 15

Scholarship in the design of curriculum and the professional practice of tertiary
teaching – a personal perspective
Anne Hume 21

Learning styles and other modern myths
Ivan Snook 29

COMMENT

Some reflections on the New Zealand Curriculum, 2007
Gregory Lee & Howard Lee 35

The timid curriculum
Ivan Snook 39

Comment on the New Zealand Curriculum
Irene Cooper & Sandra Aikin 43

Social Sciences in the New Zealand Curriculum: A case of arrested development?
Mediating challenges ahead
Philippa Hunter 47

Health and Physical Education and the New Zealand Curriculum 2007: Ongoing
challenges
Katie Fitzpatrick 51

Twenty-first century schools with nineteenth and twentieth century curriculum
and tools
Nadine Ballam 55

BOOK REVIEW

The hidden lives of learners, by Graham Nuthall
Reviewed by Colin Gibbs 59

TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM is an annual publication of the School of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

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.

ISSN 1174-2208

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that:

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- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
- review books that have a curriculum focus.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF REVIEWERS

We wish to thank the following people who reviewed for this edition of *Teachers and Curriculum*. Asterisks indicate reviewers who contributed more than one review.

Guy Broadley
Ken Carr
Wendy Carss
Gail Cawkwell
Linda Daniell
Colin Gibbs*
Ted Glynn
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Greg Lee*
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COMMENT ON THE *NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM*

IRENE COOPER AND SANDRA AIKIN
NZEI TE RIU ROA

This paper revisits our earlier article (Cooper & Aikin, 2006) which explored the vision and intention of the *New Zealand Curriculum Draft for Consultation 2006* (Ministry of Education, 2006) within the wider context of New Zealand's transformation to a 'knowledge society' and 'global competitiveness'. We looked at the challenges to a national provision of curriculum brought about by the changing environment. We tried to engage teachers in the discussion by posing a number of questions and also canvassed the implications of the need for schools to have additional support and resourcing to ensure they could meet the aims of the curriculum and government expectations.

The focus of this commentary is to continue that conversation. We look at teachers' responses to the *New Zealand Curriculum Draft for Consultation 2006* and discuss issues of implementation in more depth than in our earlier article. We argued that teachers, individually and collectively, have a significant role to play in the maintenance and enhancement of quality public education in New Zealand. It is only with teacher understanding and action that successful implementation of the policy and sustained quality across a national education system can be achieved. Every teacher needs to be drawn into the discussion.

THE LAUNCH

We did not expect any discord to accompany the release of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007a). Our expectation was that it would reinforce, clarify and reframe thinking about learning and teaching, and promote a holistic and inquiry approach relevant to students.

Many professionals had seen potential in the curriculum draft and appreciated the intention to allow schools to concentrate on student needs, giving primary teachers more freedom to determine the most effective way to teach the curriculum. The emphasis on the principles, values and key competencies necessary for learning was seen by teachers as more relevant for a curriculum for the twenty-first century. For teachers the learning focus was to be sharpened.

In 2006, the then Education Minister, Steve Maharey, provided a teacher release day to encourage schools to engage with the ideas of the curriculum draft and many schools took the opportunity to work through the ideas with others in their cluster. Over 10,000 responses to the draft were received by the Ministry. Thousands of teachers had participated in the online discussions on the achievement objectives, the values and key competencies. Many individual teachers helped shape the essence statements of the Learning Areas. National organisations provided advice through an overarching reference group and passed this information on through their national networks.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the launch of the *New Zealand Curriculum* received strong affirmation by the profession.

IMPLEMENTATION

The *New Zealand Curriculum* operates as a framework at three levels: the national policy level, the school programme level and the classroom programme level.

The framework is both descriptive and prescriptive but its elements (vision, principles, values, key competencies, achievement objectives) will need further elaboration before teachers will be able to use them in their learning programmes. It is our view that the size of the implementation task has been understated. We should not delude ourselves that the *New Zealand Curriculum* can be quickly taken up in the way it was intended. The implementation phase will require in-depth

engagement, ongoing focus and support beyond the planned three years.

The diagram in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.7) shows three streams; values, competencies and learning areas. All streams contribute to student capability and are inter-linked through assessment and its evidence base. We contend that the vision which will create the leverage for twenty-first century learning is one where all these ideas come together in an holistic way. If schools get the idea that they are already doing everything or just have a bit to add on then they will not fulfill the potential of the document.

A central message of the *New Zealand Curriculum* is that schools know best how to manage the learning of their students, and teachers know how to teach. While this is true, there is still need for support. For example, apart from suggestions that learning could be organised around larger themes of sustainability, enterprise and globalisation, no advice is provided on how the themes inform each other or how the values fit within education in a democracy.

Our earlier skepticism about concepts such as 'entrepreneurial' and 'financial literacy' remains. The worthiness of all students being financially capable is undisputed. While we see merit in students understanding the meaning of money as a lifetime benefit, we want the theme of 'financial capability' to be in response to students' needs at the relevant stages of their lives.

Many teachers have been working on research and pilot projects to interpret the key competencies and how they could be integrated. The indication from teachers is that it requires concerted effort over time, two to three years, to develop and embed these competencies throughout the school in curriculum planning, teaching and assessment. Our new teachers have had little basis for this work within their preservice teacher education as it is new to all of us (Boyd & Watson, 2006). Those who talk of quick fixes and simple solutions are understating the significance of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and the density of conceptual underpinnings that sit behind the document. Teachers are dealing with the implications of these changes and other new expectations such as:

- the shift in principle from 'cultural heritage' to 'cultural diversity';
- the new and re-packaged achievement objectives;
- the ways to develop and include student voice;
- the need to ensure a 'futures focus' is used and understood.

In addition, there are other expectations of the further reframing of concepts of learner-centred teaching, keeping students at the heart of learning and embedding assessment for learning using multiple measures.

The relationship between the teacher and student is clarified. What has long been considered as good practice for primary schools, that a teacher will work alongside the student, is now acknowledged. The emphasis given in the *New Zealand Curriculum* that teachers themselves will lead improvements is a welcome one.

One of the key intentions of the *New Zealand Curriculum* is to ensure every student has success, a worthy aspiration not achieved previously. Therefore, new ways of teaching practice need to be found. This will require teachers to be supported in their pedagogy through sound professional leadership and through professional learning programmes that model and coach for the new expectations. The type of teacher autonomy advocated in the *New Zealand Curriculum* invites teachers to take on new ideas that will contribute to the goal of achievement for all.

Professional leadership will need to clarify how the curriculum will look in practice, including a focus on reporting and accountability. One commentator (Flockton, personal communication, by permission, June, 2007) has suggested that schools staple shut the achievement objectives in the back of the document. This would encourage teachers to engage with the intent of the text as a whole, the focus and balance, as they organise for curriculum implementation within their context. The formal requirements, however, are that schools will take account of the achievement objectives and 'tailor' programmes to the learning needs and interests of the school's students.

... Each Board of Trustees, through the principal and staff, must draw on the achievement objectives published in the New Zealand Curriculum to ensure that the progress and achievement of student learning throughout schooling is enabled, and tailor programmes to the learning needs and interests of the school's students. (Ministry of Education, 2008)

The Ministry's intention in setting the framework. A coherent response is required between a school's capacity to interpret the framework for their context, and the individual teacher's preparedness to turn this into effective teaching for every student in their classroom. The professional support provided to enable this in the immediate and short term is critical.

The Government must recognise that a culture of compliance has developed within the education system through accountability mechanisms. School leadership teams will need to reassert their confidence in their own abilities to effect improvement. How individual Education Review Office teams engage with schools is crucial. They must encourage rather than constrain. In a letter to the Chief Review Officer, the Minister of Education states:

I am aware, however, that schools are at different stages on the journey to fully implementing the New Zealand Curriculum. I would be interested in any evaluation of how well implementation is progressing, both in individual schools and at a national level, and to receive any recommendations for further action and improvement where necessary. (Carter, 2008)

TE MARAUTANGA O AOTEAROA

Te Marautanga o Aotearoa Draft for Consultation (Ministry of Education, 2007b) was launched a week after the *New Zealand Curriculum*. *Te Marautanga* will pose challenges for schools where Māori students are educated in the mainstream. The *Te Marautanga* is not simply a Māori translation of the *New Zealand Curriculum*. It does not simply parallel the *New Zealand Curriculum* in terms of structure, content and approach.

Te Marautanga is intended for use in level one and two bilingual units located in mainstream schools. So, to have cohesion on the site, there needs to be some major accommodation made. Other schools may also find the philosophy of *Te Marautanga* more conducive to their own ways of working and some will be considering how their school aligns with the document. This can be partially accommodated but how the key competencies are to be handled then becomes a major stumbling block.

Te Marautanga identifies a set of cultural values arising from the Treaty of Waitangi and implicit in the overarching principles, values and attitudes of the draft. Social outcomes of schooling such as: 'being content', the aspiration of 'generous and caring', 'hospitality' and the extending of the curriculum into marae settings provide a new curriculum orientation. What does

this mean for staff in mainstream settings developing programmes inclusive of Māori students and their cultural needs? What should be the interplay between these two documents if the Treaty is to be fully recognised? Principals must engage with these questions because *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* is a central part of the partnership in schools between Māori and Pākehā.

In effect, *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa Draft* heralded the fact that New Zealand would have a national curriculum for students whose learning is through the English medium and a separate one for students whose learning is through the Māori medium. With 84 percent of Māori students attending English-medium schools, it is incumbent on teachers to engage with the ideas in *Te Marautanga*. It is incumbent on the Ministry to provide the resources for teachers to gain insights into the vision, goals and approach taken by *Te Marautanga*.

Te Marautanga presents a challenge for teachers, schools and the system to make a significant difference not only to Māori students but all students. The successful response to this challenge has to be facilitated.

WHAT WILL BE NEEDED?

The success of the *New Zealand Curriculum* will be measured by how closely the quality of the school leaver matches the graduate profile provided in its vision. This will depend on professional learning and development opportunities that enable principals and teachers to share and understand the vision and to be guided by the principles and values underpinning the curriculum.

The implementation in schools relies on school leadership having an holistic view of the curriculum, and shaping school improvement plans so that teachers will provide the learning opportunities leading to high levels of student achievement and motivation. It is encouraging that some principals are reporting that their schools are already doing some of what is expected (Gillespie, 2007; Gillies, 2007). Others will need to consider how to support teachers to take up the challenge.

Schools will need to set their priorities through their school communities and shift their focus so that parents are more actively involved in the learning process.

For teachers, renewal of practice has become a fact of their professional life. The annual demands of the literacy and numeracy projects are aimed at maintaining and trying to improve upon current practice. There are also large numbers of beginning teachers in schools who will need to be coached in the new and emerging practice.

As well as the Key Competencies, a number of other initiatives, such as the Literacy Learning Progressions, Financial Literacy, dyslexia, make further demands on teacher practice. The extent and intention of each new initiative need to be examined and then applied to the learning needs of the students in the classroom. The challenge for the teacher then becomes to weave that initiative into the broader curriculum context.

Currently, not all principals have access to cluster group workshops. High numbers of schools wishing to be involved have been told that their support will come in other ways, i.e. through non-funded cluster work. This indicates that Government resourcing is insufficient to tap into the enthusiasm of the profession. If all educational leaders do not have the same access to the tailor-made professional learning, we fear that consistency of practice and the national provision of curriculum are unlikely to be realised. We have learned from past experience that the cascade model of learning does not work. All principals must be brought into the debate and must have equal access to the workshops.

For an initiative as important as the *New Zealand Curriculum* to be successful it needs to be well resourced. At its launch, Education Minister Chris Carter, announced he was giving schools a day in 2008 to engage with the *New Zealand Curriculum* and was considering a further day in 2009. He has also suggested that schools should use 'call-back' days to supplement this (Carter, 2007). Obviously the Minister has not yet come to terms with the heavy workload of primary school teachers which remains a persistent concern for schools (Wylie, 2007) and for the families of principals and teachers. The Minister also appears unaware that principals would have already planned and advised teachers how the 'call-back' days will be used, for example: 'Meet the Teachers', school camp, three days preparation prior to the first term, school productions.

The Ministry has aligned its professional development contracts and resource networks to assist with the implementation of the curriculum, but it is not enough. If the Ministry is committed to all schools implementing the curriculum effectively, then the support teachers say they need should be made available.

Initial teacher education also has to change. All providers responsible for the immediate supply, and the next generation, of teachers need to engage with the *New Zealand Curriculum*. This is a national curriculum and requires a national endeavour.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The first two phases of the curriculum are now complete. It has taken four years to move from the recommendations of the Curriculum Stocktake (Ministry of Education, 2002) to this slim, tightly worded and packed document. The *New Zealand Curriculum* now has to be interpreted at the school and classroom levels. This is occurring at a time when funding and workload issues are dominating the agenda on 'success' for all students and effective teaching. How will teachers have enough time to plan and work together, to share ideas and resources, to support each other and reflect while continuing their everyday teaching role? Will schools be able to rise to the challenge and be able to implement the *New Zealand Curriculum* at the quality level intended? These are questions the Ministry must consider.

We compliment the Ministry on the open and transparent approach taken in the development of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and in pulling the competing positions and discussions together.

We urge the Ministry to provide additional support and resourcing to ensure all schools can meet the aims of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and Government expectations.

Five years on it will be interesting to see if what is occurring in the classroom realises the expectations of the curriculum.

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