

Teachers and Curriculum



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

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- iii provide examples of informed curriculum focus
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TRUSTING TEACHERS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WORK OF TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

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One of the fascinations about living in New Zealand is that in this liberal democracy there has always been debate about the schooling of children and adolescents. It seems that just about everybody has a point of view on what should be taught, and how well students achieve, and whether standards of achievement are better or worse than they used to be. It is a lucky country that can achieve a climate of contestation over these very important matters without its citizens resorting to violence or oppression of holders of dissenting views. In New Zealand we have a long tradition of having a national curriculum which provides the structure and design for a broad, general education for all children, with the chance for more options at the senior school levels. Over the years there has been a large measure of public trust in teachers as the professionals who implement the curriculum. In this opinion piece I want to focus upon the relationship between the work teachers undertake in schools and the national curriculum. I want to draw attention to some issues of importance in this relationship, especially to do with teacher autonomy, school-based decision-making, and what can reasonably be expected of teachers in relation to student achievement.

New Zealand has a world-class schooling system and many world-class schools. Teachers deserve great credit for their central role in bringing this about. Parents and the wider community also deserve credit for the high expectations and importance placed upon quality education and access to education. International test results confirm that many New Zealand students can achieve as well as the best in other countries. However, there is a long-standing concern about disparities in achievement, with some students performing below what might be expected. Since the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms from 1988, there has been considerable government policy commitment to increasing the academic achievement of lower performing students. Naturally, there has been much debate about the causes of failure to achieve and the strategies needed to improve. Some attribute the failure to teachers; if only they would change their teaching approaches things would improve. Others attribute it to the socioeconomic conditions in which students live. Others believe there is a combination of both. The latter is more realistic, but more complex to unravel. What we *do* know is that the community places enormous expectations upon teachers to bring about improvements in school achievement.

It is impossible to accurately quantify causes and effects of school achievement. Nevertheless, there are indications that both school and home are very influential. First, a review of best evidence related to teaching has shown that at least half of the in-school impacts upon student achievement come from the teacher (Alton-Lee, 2003). This throws the spotlight upon the need for knowledgeable, well-prepared teachers and a national curriculum which teachers understand and have the ability to adapt for their particular students. Bishop and colleagues (in Alton-Lee, 2003) have described research which indicated that changes in the ways teachers teach Māori students can result in improved academic learning and motivation to learn. Improvement was brought about when teachers better understood the culture and motivations of students. Teachers were helped to change their classroom strategies to enthuse their students about learning and success.

Second, it has long been shown that family circumstances relate to school achievement, but they do so in ways that are very complex. For example, Nash and Prochnow (2004) have shown links between household income, the number of books in the home, and scores on the Progress in International Reading Literacy

Study (PIRLS). However, students from all income and book levels were distributed across all levels of scores, even if somewhat unevenly. The upshot of this is that some students from the lowest income and book levels achieved at the highest levels and vice versa. Clearly, teachers were involved in getting some students to achieve beyond what might be expected if social class was the main limiting factor.

Policy makers should not get carried away with the results of either of the above sets of evidence. Nash and Prochnow themselves caution against a simplistic policy conclusion that all schools can equalize their students' achievement by increasing teachers' expectations. In my view, there has been too much policy emphasis upon that conclusion already. In a thought-provoking paper presented at the 2005 AERA Conference, David Berliner claimed that there are clear and undeniable links between school achievement and poverty in the United States. In his view, no amount of school intervention could turn around all of the negative fall-out in students' lives.

All of this points to a need to be more sensible about what can reasonably be expected of teachers. This is not to in any way suggest that lower teacher expectations are acceptable. It actually reinforces the need for highly competent teachers. It is, however, necessary to be realistic. Teachers, especially those in lower decile schools, face amazing complexities in the student mix (Thrupp, 1997). I have noticed with some dismay that teachers have too much of their teaching time taken up with negative matters such as truancy, settling-in many new arrivals in a school year, anti-social behaviour, and students with all manner of particular needs who reside in regular classes. Thus, the laudable goal of tailoring learning programmes to suit every student's needs is impossible to meet. It is remarkable that, overall, student achievement is as good as it is.

In the face of continuing exhortations by politicians and others that teachers must improve schooling, I found it interesting to read a number of ERO reports of school reviews. I was impressed by the references to effective teachers across both poorer and richer schools. In a Decile 1 school, teachers were seen as "dedicated, hard working ... committed to providing the best possible learning experiences for students." There was evidence of local decisions to cater for student needs, again, across the decile range. There were programmes to enrich high achievers, provide remedial help, and promote positive attitudes to learning. However, there were differences brought about by the composition of the student intakes. In low decile school reports there was more emphasis upon behaviour management (especially for some groups of boys), strategies to deal with high rates of truancy, absence and lateness, high rates of learning difficulties, greater efforts to get more parents involved, health issues and the provision of breakfast for some students. In high decile school reports these aspects were largely absent. In spite of these challenges, there were references to teachers in low-decile schools who made learning enjoyable and interesting, catered for individual needs and enriched high achievers.

Furthermore, there was evidence of school-based curriculum decision-making. For example, in one school, it was reported that:

Students are becoming increasingly active learners able to use inquiry skills, critical thinking and problem-solving strategies across a range of contexts and curriculum areas. Inquiry skills and research strategies are carefully introduced to young learners and sequentially developed throughout their time at school.

It was also noted that user-friendly access to information was provided by fast and efficient computer equipment. There was also an electives programme that utilized teacher strengths and allowed students to pursue interests. These statements are consistent with my own belief that students should receive a broad, flexible education. If they are receiving it, there is little need for a punitive regime of testing as suggested in some quarters.

A central argument that I want to advance in this opinion piece is that teachers are the key curriculum decision-makers at the school level and that it is counter-productive to expect them to adhere rigidly to a national curriculum prescription. It seems that we have been through a period in the 1990s where a drive to implement new curriculum statements may have led to greater similarity between schools. On the face of it, that is not necessarily bad. However, there is a danger that greater conformity removes the very essence of what I am advocating; that is, greater autonomy for teachers to be innovative with curriculum design at school level.

On the positive side of this issue, it seems to me that in the last few years there have been changes afoot. There are signs of more willingness to undertake school-based projects and *The Education Gazette* has many examples of schools enthusiastically setting up studies that interest and engage students. Granted, some of them are implementing government projects, but there is local variation and adaptation. It is to be hoped that the spirit of experimentation and innovation expands to explore new ways of organizing content, different approaches to learning, and even trials of different ways of organizing the school setting and structures such as timetables.

One of the biggest issues facing teachers is curriculum coverage. Designers of national curriculum are constantly bombarded by calls to include all manner of things. There are many examples of problems in society being followed by claims that schools can help redress the problems with the captured younger generation. Fitness programmes to cure obesity, traffic education to reduce the road toll, safety from all kinds of threats such as dangerous strangers, better behaviour to correct family shortcomings, swimming lessons to reduce drownings, are but a few of the many examples that can be cited.

At the same time there are demands for more time to be spent on "basic" subjects. Of course, it is necessary for all students to learn basic skills and information, and some of the learning needs to be focused in a way that commits learning to both short-term and long-term memory. However, students also need to utilize that memorized learning by adding to it and using it to engage with a wide range of learning activities such as problem-solving and inter-subject studies. In the world outside school, few aspects of life can be dealt with by recourse to a single subject, yet this idea persists in the design of the national curriculum and many classroom programmes. More than ever, students need to learn to be flexible thinkers based upon the acquisition of sound information and skills combined with the ability to think in flexible ways. When students are engaged in interesting activities they are learning. It is strange to me how so many people are distrustful of this. Over the years I have been fortunate to have seen numerous teachers who did believe it; teachers who planned varied, interesting and challenging activities across the range of curriculum subjects. Their students received a broad general education. There was little need for regular formal tests, because ongoing small scale tests and occasional standardised diagnostic tests

provided sufficient evidence of learning.

The above may seem like a risky excursion into trusting teachers to make the required decisions at the level of the school. Yes it is. And it is overdue. Since the policy changes of *Tomorrow's Schools* from 1988, teachers' autonomy has been reduced. Increased surveillance and more prescriptive curriculum statements (syllabi) require coverage of specified achievement objectives. Compliance has increased, evidenced by considerable paperwork (McGee et al., 2004).

I suspect that increased compliance has made it more difficult for teachers to teach in flexible ways. The practice of students spending long hours sitting in rows listening to a teacher or completing worksheets is no longer a satisfactory approach to teaching and learning. There should be much greater emphasis upon students being part of the designing of their own curriculum and upon more flexible ways of learning. It is no longer necessary for students to be confined to traditional classrooms; more learning can occur outside the school and through searching for information and processing it to solve problems and address issues. Access to search engines needs to be revolutionized in schools. In many schools, students have a high degree of classroom access to computers, yet in others their only access is in a computer laboratory thus reducing content-related access when it is relevant. In earlier years the *School Journal* and textbooks brought the world into the classroom, along with teacher knowledge. Now Google and Mozilla and Yahoo do this.

A compulsory national curriculum is designed to provide the public with an assurance that the children of today receive a broad, general education that will result in adults with a range of skills and knowledge. It also provides teachers with a blueprint from which to plan learning experiences in schools to achieve this goal. Drawing up a national curriculum is no easy task, for everyone, it seems, has their own views about what should be included. There is widespread agreement about certain fundamentals like the necessity to read and write and compute; beyond that, however, there is considerable debate about what knowledge is worthy of inclusion. There is advocacy for all manner of things. It is sometimes forgotten or not realised by proponents that, at best, a national curriculum represents a tiny fraction of the sum of human knowledge, even within particular subjects. And many subjects are not there at all. In the process of curriculum revision to subjects, I have observed earnest and sometimes heated

discussion over the merits of this or that content that are seen to be vital to a student's learning. But, such is the enormity of possible content, that too much energy is spent upon particularities. It is better to have a rich array of topics with more design effort on good sequencing, resources and relevance.

CONCLUSION

In this opinion piece I have looked briefly at a few issues that relate to the interface between national curriculum and its implementation by teachers in schools. In my view, most New Zealand teachers already do a good job in designing classroom programmes based upon the national curriculum. Sure, they could no doubt do better, as we all can in any job. But they face many pressures to do more and more better and better, and I am concerned about the cumulative effects of overwork and stress. I have argued that teachers are the key curriculum decision-makers because they are the ones in the best position to see what students really need in schools.

Society has to be careful to keep demands upon teachers in check. I believe that students benefit most from capable teachers who are given leeway to exercise their professional judgment. Certainly, they need to be accountable, but not through over-zealous means. Teachers with autonomy, ability and confidence are more likely to capture the enthusiasm and imagination of their students. I fear the earnestness of policy makers and the public to leave no stone unturned in pressuring teachers to perform miracles may have bowed teachers down. Schools and teachers do not need heavy-handed bureaucracy that overloads them with compliance. We need them to be positive, fit and confident, and we need them to enjoy their work. Most of all, teachers need encouragement and freedom to ignite the sparks of learning in their students. All students might, then, enjoy their time at school and experience it as a stimulating part of their growing up.

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