

Teachers and Curriculum



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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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VOLUME 9 2006

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COMMENTARY

TEACHERS' DECISION-MAKING AND THE DRAFT 2006 CURRICULUM

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In a recent comment in *Teachers and Curriculum* I drew attention to the importance of the relationship between classroom teachers and the national curriculum. In particular, I speculated about how much decision-making autonomy teachers have in relation to a national curriculum and argued that since the 1990s revisions of the national curriculum (*The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, Ministry of Education, 1992), teachers have been pressured by accountability measures. I discussed tensions between central (state) curriculum policy demands and teachers' decision-making in schools. I wondered whether too much is expected of teachers, as they seem to be increasingly called to account as the transforming agents of children's learning. Policy demands to reduce disparities in academic achievement between students has caused teachers' work to come under increasing scrutiny.

Recently, a new draft national curriculum statement has been published and disseminated for reaction: *The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation 2006*. The purpose of this opinion piece is to discuss the extent to which there may be opportunities for teachers and schools to plan and teach learning programmes with increased levels of local decisions. A new draft national curriculum is a major curriculum milestone. Indeed, following regular revisions of the whole curriculum from 1877 to the 1940s, it was nearly 50 years to the next one in the 1990s. In those 50 years the curriculum changed through what was known as "rolling" revision, where one syllabus was changed at a time. Even in the 1990s the change was staggered, for a new framework, nominated seven learning areas (subjects) and statements (syllabuses) were progressively written and released through the rest of the 1990s. But a key difference was that for the first time in nearly half a century there was a single over-arching framework. The frameworks prior to the 1940s were highly prescriptive, whereas the rolling revision years were characterised by short statement that suggested a range of possible topics for teachers. This approach reduced the prescriptive emphasis of the state and increased the level of responsibility upon teachers to decide what was best to study at a local school. Thus the design of the curriculum influenced the kind of teacher required to implement it. On the one hand the earlier curricula set out the specific details of the curriculum content that was to be followed by teachers: on the other hand, syllabuses during the years of rolling revision contained suggestions for possible content rather than explicit directives. Thus, a different kind of teacher was required, one with a higher degree of autonomy to plan more varied topics to be taught in more imaginative ways. This was an approach to both curriculum design and implementation that placed high trust in teachers to make appropriate decisions about what was best for their students.

During the 1980s, there were several national reviews of the New Zealand curriculum (McGee, 1997): *A review of the core curriculum for schools* (1984), *The Curriculum Review* (1987), and *National curriculum statement: A discussion document for primary and secondary schools* (1988). They were in response to concerns that the curriculum, under a more liberal regime of rolling revision, had become somewhat fragmented. Perhaps, it was argued (McGee, 1997), the curriculum needed to be better coordinated and connected and sequenced across the years of schooling; and, indeed better linked to early childhood and tertiary education. There were associated concerns that some students "slipped through the net" in terms of their educational achievement. To remedy this situation, perhaps more systematic planning and evaluation by teachers was required. Such criticisms are, of course, hard to substantiate and quantify in terms of evidence of student achievement such as test results. However, across society in the 1980s, there were increasing calls for greater accountability, generally, in publicly-funded enterprises such as schooling.

It was, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the new curriculum framework and curriculum statements of the 1990s reflected the political and economic imperatives for schools to be more accountable for the academic achievement of all students. It was argued that with new accountability would come reduced disparities in student learning and better-qualified school leavers to contribute

to an emerging knowledge society (so-called). All of this brought teachers under the spotlight. Politically, there were measures to reassure the public that school achievement would rise, such as the development of an unambiguous curriculum and regulations to ensure teaching of the "basics" of literacy and numeracy and rigorous assessment and reporting procedures.

The government created the Education Review Office as a checking mechanism to reassure the public that everything possible was being done to raise student achievement. Thus, it can be argued that since the 1992 curriculum framework there has been a climate of less trust in teachers to maintain acceptable levels of practice on their own; rather, they needed to be regularly reviewed. It needs to be pointed out that previous to ERO there was a national inspectorate to check on standards (see for example *Educational standards in state schools* (Department of Education, 1978). However, a major difference was that the inspectorate was more than an assessing body; it also provided advice and mentoring to teachers.

It is of considerable importance to investigate how the new draft is designed in relation the roles teachers might play in curriculum decision-making. What does the new draft suggest as the fundamental directions and requirements for student learning? Does the design allow for greater teacher flexibility and autonomy in making decisions as they develop school and classroom programmes? Is there room for greater input at local school level?

In the new 2006 draft there is clear evidence of a change in the official rhetoric to now give greater recognition to the desirability and value of increased teacher autonomy in how the national curriculum is interpreted and adapted at the school level of policy and implementation. This is clear in the letter that went out with the draft from the Minister of Education, when he stated that the draft would, "allow them [teachers] greater flexibility to develop new and innovative teaching approaches, and to engage all students in rich and authentic learning experiences". It seems that the views of many advocates (and especially teachers) during the curriculum stocktake process in the early to mid-2000s had impacted: that is, greater autonomy for schools. Further evidence is from the Secretary for Education, Howard Fancy, when he made this new spirit of autonomy clear in writing in the introduction to the draft:

The New Zealand Curriculum sets the broad directions for education. It is expected that when schools develop their programmes, they will interpret these directions in ways that take account of the diverse learning needs of their students and the expectations of their communities. Schools and communities working in partnership can use this document as the starting point for creating exciting learning opportunities (p. 3).

These statements are very important. They confirm that this new national curriculum statement (2006 draft) is a broad framework that describes the scope of the curriculum for the general population of students. In that sense, it is. At the same time, the framework can be seen as a collection of possibilities because teachers are expected to take initiatives in adapting the framework for local circumstances. Nevertheless, the draft provides both a firm direction in its focus upon "bottom line" requirements that schools and teachers are obligated to attend to in a school

programme of teaching and learning; and a degree of openness for teachers. There are eight learning areas (or subjects or collections of subjects, as in science and the arts). Teachers cannot escape the policy requirement that these areas be covered, but there is no direction about the time and scope of each in a school programme. At the outset of the draft there are statements of vision and principles. Together, they represent the curriculum designers' views, the aspirations of the curriculum, and what is highly valued in a general education in this country. These, along with statements on values in schools and key competencies, will need careful consideration by teachers in the consultation phase of the draft. The main consideration should be whether what is written can be understood and the potential for incorporating the intentions of the designers into school programmes (and they should remember that many teachers have been involved in the work that lead to the draft.)



In considering how curriculum might be designed at school level, the draft contains useful indicators to reinforce the general thrust of my argument that teachers will play an increasing role in local decision-making. Principles of curriculum design are suggested in the section on p.26:

School trustees, principals, and teachers work closely with one another and with students and other members of the school community to plan the school curriculum. Careful planning results in a school curriculum that is connected, coherent, and balanced and that reflects the particular needs and interests of the school's students and community. ...[It is recognised that,] Different schools will organise their learning programmes in different ways.

There are two aspects of design that I want to highlight. First, in the study of the epistemology of knowledge, increasing attention is being given to how knowledge is constructed and classified. Typically in the past it has been organised in subjects and the New Zealand curriculum has always followed this approach. This latest draft is no exception. Schools commonly teach each subject separately. Yet increasingly, it is recognised that most human issues, advances and problems need to be addressed by using knowledge from a range of subjects. It makes sense, then, to give students the experience of making links between subjects through themes and utilising the skills and abilities outlined in the key competencies section of the draft. Rutherford (2005) provides a good account of the background work on key competencies.

The second aspect concerns achievement objectives. The curriculum documents written in the 1990s for each learning area were based upon numerous achievement objectives, or learning outcomes. The 2006 draft gives recognition to the criticism that there were previously too many objectives. Teachers – due to pressure for coverage – found the curriculum overcrowded, especially when they had to also respond to assessment recording pressure. The new draft reveals a marked reduction in the number of objectives which should provide teachers with the chance to plan for fewer objectives and more in-depth study. A related concern, however, is the continuation of an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design. While it is helpful to have goals and expectations clear for students, this can be taken too far. Eisner (1994) eloquently advocated a range of objectives to utilise the various skills and abilities that children possess, and especially, their curiosity and creativity. That is, we need to leave room for more adventurous learning, in which the outcomes are not always predetermined.

Eisner talked about emergent outcomes where uncertainty could lead a student on wonderful, unpredictable learning journeys.

In summary, I am optimistic that the new draft of 2006 contains evidence of a renewed faith in teachers as curriculum designers in their school. Teachers now have the chance to step up their professional role with a fresh commitment to key decision-making about curriculum. The draft, in itself, cannot do this for teachers. It is they who must bring about the enacted curriculum, that is, what actually happens in classrooms under their guidance. Therefore, this renewed commitment to greater teacher autonomy is not to be taken lightly.

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