THINKPIECE: THE KEY COMPETENCIES: DO WE VALUE THE SAME OUTCOMES AND HOW WOULD WE KNOW?

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The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007*)* contains several key elements that are the framework on which schools design their local school curriculum. This includes the vision, the principles, the values, the key competencies and the learning areas. Each of these elements do not stand alone but are designed to guide and interact with each other to inform the school and classroom curriculum.

It would appear that many schools are implementing the different elements of the curriculum well, if a trawl through the hundreds of school and classroom stories that can be found on the New Zealand Curriculum and other websites is anything to go by. But the question remains: how well are schools seeing the connections *between* the elements of the curriculum to ensure that its transformative potential is realised. How well do schools see how the principles could, and should, inform the learning areas, the key competencies and the values? How well are the key competencies being integrated and developed through the multiple contexts that the learning areas offer? How well is the relationship between the principles and the key competencies understood? It is this final question, and in particular the relationship between cultural diversity and the key competencies that has framed my continued study in this area. This think piece does not attempt to capture key findings emerging from my ongoing research, but is more about provoking discussion and reflection by readers on my ideas as I explore these two important educational concepts in the New Zealand Curriculum.

Early monitoring and evaluation studies that commenced prior to the launch of the curriculum in November 2007 revealed that "early adopter" schools tended to begin their implementation journey by starting with one of the elements of the "front end" of the curriculum, and in many cases, this involved grappling with the complexities of the key competencies (Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011). However, in 2011 and again in 2012, ERO found that schools' understanding and implementation of the principles was not strong, in particular, understandings and practice associated with the Treaty of Waitangi and Cultural Diversity. A deep understanding of the principles and their implications for school and classroom policies and practices has the potential to transform the school curriculum, particularly in improving outcomes for those less well served by the system.

Many New Zealand educators are familiar with work of Friere (1970) and Bourdieu (1993), and others, who have highlighted the impact of the "hidden curriculum" on minority student achievement and success in mainstream education which tends to perpetuate a dominant cultural perspective (see McGee & Fraser, 2008). The notion of a co-constructed school curriculum between the school and its wider community can be a key vehicle in raising awareness of the different value sets that people hold, and how this impacts on the valued outcomes that individuals and groups want for their students. The Community Engagement principle of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9) encourages schools to seek a closer relationship with the parents, families and whānau of their students. It encourages them to establish partnerships where conversations, collaboration and co-construction can occur. Through tapping into local community contexts and knowledge, through exploring and valuing the richness of different worldviews and perspectives, the proposition is that all learners are provided with opportunities to engage with their own prior knowledge, to see the relevance of their learning, and expand their ability to reflect on and understand different points of view (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008, p. 56).

A truly co-constructed curriculum may not be an easy task for schools. It may require taking meetings and events off-site to ensure that potential power dynamics are minimised and that community members who may have felt intimidated or alienated by school environments can be encouraged to express their views. It often requires skilled negotiation between sometimes strongly held positions. But it is where different cultural perspectives and worldviews, different educational experiences and philosophies, and different attitudes, values and behaviours can be explored and negotiated in terms of a shared vision and curriculum for the school and its students. For school staff and community members alike, it may well be an enlightening experience where one is required to

examine one's own beliefs and assumptions about the valued outcomes of the school curriculum.

In the area of the key competencies these valued outcomes can be wide and varied. While the descriptions of the five key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum give some indication of the level of complexity inherent in each, schools have largely been left to their own devices in interpreting how they will be enacted and developed within classroom and school contexts. Attempts to manage this complexity has given rise to the use of rubrics in some schools which risk reducing the key competencies to a list of behaviours that can be ticked off or graded on a simple Likert scale and recorded on school reports. Not only does this risk "surface level" interpretation of the key competencies but also brings into question how these various "indicators" of competence were arrived at; how do/do they take account of different individual and cultural traits and valued behaviours and attitudes? Do they take account of how consistently competence is demonstrated across a range of different learning areas and contexts, both culturally familiar and unfamiliar? These are important questions to ask if we wish to prepare our young people to interact effectively with a diverse range of peoples in local as well as global communities; in work and in social situations. Does competence in "using language symbols and texts" assume that we all start from the same point in the meaning we take from different texts, symbols and other forms of communication and it is merely the use of the tools and devices available to us, and that we are familiar with, that demonstrate our competence in sharing our thoughts and ideas? Is "managing self" defined in ways that incorporate both individualistic and collective perspectives, and the ability to draw from the toolkit of social skills and practices when faced with views and behaviours that are different to our own? Do "participating and contributing and relating to others" explore and embrace the multitude of ways that this can be done across many different contexts?

The Social Sciences learning area of the curriculum potentially explores some of diverse socio-cultural contexts but through integrating the key competencies across all classroom and school contexts teachers can provide a much richer range of learning opportunities for students to understand and develop these competencies. And while this is all part of the learning journey for our students, it is also a learning journey for our school leaders and teachers as they inquire into the assumptions and values that may have underpinned earlier thinking and frameworks, and reach to their communities for guidance on more culturally inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices.

It is hoped that this think piece helps a little in this important journey; that the questions posed here might help schools and teachers reflect on how they are currently implementing and evaluating students' key competency development and through what lenses those judgements are being made.

> It is time for parents [and schools] to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. (Maya Angelou, 1928–, African American writer and poet)

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