

EDITORIAL

The need for ongoing critique of curriculum

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About this Publication

Welcome to this first edition of *Teachers and Curriculum*. The term 'curriculum' is used here in its broad sense of what happens for learners. It therefore encompasses official documents, interpretations of these, texts and technological aids, classroom interactions, and messages received by students. If you like, it includes policy, practice and learners' constructions. The purpose of the publication are to (i) raise issues to do with curriculum, (ii) present relevant research, and (iii) offer examples of informed curriculum practice. Reviews of books with a curriculum focus are also included. The main audience is teachers, but it is anticipated that the publication will appeal to other educators, researchers and perhaps Board of Trustees members. It is also likely to contain challenges for curriculum policy makers and curriculum developers at both national and local levels. It is intended that *Teachers and Curriculum* be published annually. Notes for contributors to future issues are included at the back of this issue.

Why publish *Teachers and Curriculum*? There are several reasons, as alluded to in the purposes listed above. These include (i) a need to bring curriculum to the forefront of educational debate, (ii) providing an avenue for publishing curriculum-related research, particularly research undertaken by teachers, and (iii) enabling a sharing within the profession of instances of informed curriculum practice, especially that developed by teachers.

The second and third of these reasons probably need no further elaboration. In this sense, the publication complements the various professional association publications, the SAMEpapers yearbook of the University of Waikato, and SET, the joint publication of ACER and NZCER. The first reason is perhaps not quite so self evident, and readers may appreciate some explanation of the need to focus educational debate on curriculum. The remainder of this editorial considers this need.

The need for curriculum critique

The school curriculum is not a set of infallible truths handed down from some authority. Rather it is a human construction put together, in the final analysis, by selected 'experts', all teachers, and all learners. In the past the crucial role played by teachers has been acknowledged. Ewing (1970), for example, recognised that the official curriculum tended to reflect where the best teachers were at.

...the act of formally issuing a new syllabus serves more often than not to register officially a programme that has been talked over, tried out, and already adopted by a considerable number of teachers. (p.285)

In recent ideologically-driven reforms of education, however, serious attempts seem to have been made to de-professionalise teachers with respect to curriculum. Curriculum development at the national level has been privatised (done on contract) and teacher organisations are no longer a recognised partner in the development process. There also seems to be little involvement of teachers at the policy level in development of the senior secondary assessment and qualifications system, something which is an integral part of the curriculum. Because the real curriculum is what is finally enacted in the classroom between teacher and students, we believe that excluding teachers from the development process is a serious mistake. Whether education of government officials like it or not, each teacher **is** a curriculum developer, and many are very competent at it. The Dutch have recognised this in the development of their Realistic Mathematics Education curriculum, with the result that Dutch children do extremely well on international assessment of mathematics achievement (Carr and Treffers, 1996).

In our view, the curriculum does not figure prominently enough in educational debate at present. It does not seem to have the profile of, say, educational management or leadership, policy, or assessment, and yet the curriculum is at the heart of education. Given this, we think that since the curriculum is constructed by people it should be scrutinised critically on a regular basis to (i) expose any evidence of ideological capture, (ii) ensure that it remains dynamic, (iii) determine whether it reflects the latest educational and other insights, and (iv) examine whether it meets the needs of children and teachers.

An example of such critical analysis is that provided by Irwin (1996). Although we don't necessarily agree with everything that Irwin says, he does raise a number of serious questions about the New Zealand curriculum that need to be asked. For instance, like Elley (1993) he questions the 'levels' structure being applied to each 'learning area' document, especially since no rationale or justifiable basis is provided, and suggests, "...surely the educationally correct approach is to consider the material to be delivered and *then* to work out how it might best be structured in curriculum terms" (p.12). He also raises concern about the 'learning outcomes' approach reducing knowledge "to small fragments, each in itself trivial" (p.12), thus undermining the

intellectual coherence of subjects. In addition, Irwin suggests that the reference to critical thinking and creativity in *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* as 'skills' is misleading. He quite rightly points out (p.12) that,

...in general, students do not acquire critical thought in one form of knowledge by applying generic skills developed in other activities but rather through in-depth and systematic studies within that form of knowledge.

In Irwin's view, the present curriculum in New Zealand makes many assumptions about a great many issues rather than analysing them fully and explicitly. The result is that teachers are probably being asked to do things which are properly beyond the scope of the school, and our children's education may be put at risk. We agree with Irwin's (p.5) conclusion that we should "face up to the complexities, tensions and ambiguities involved' and that,

Taking important matters for granted is dangerous - dispensing with proper analysis and informed debate is not acceptable because of the risks that the lack of good policy development procedures may impose on the education of the nation's children. (p5).

This concern is also expressed in the paper by Ramsay et al in this volume. In school-based curriculum development, they consider it vital that teachers be helped to take a critical stance towards curriculum documents.

Finally, we share Codd's (1997) concern about the effects of managerialism on teachers, given that teachers are both curriculum mediators and curriculum developers. In his view, "Managerialism treats teachers as functionaries rather than professionals and thereby diminishes their commitment to the values and principles of education." The danger is that teachers may "...act in ways that are antithetical to certain fundamental educational values such as intellectual independence and imagination" and that the school will serve as "...an instrument for social control and economic management." Ramsay et al were also concerned about the readiness of some principals in their study to adopt without question the language and stance of managerialism.

These concerns, in our view, highlight the need to maintain a critical outlook on the New Zealand curriculum if we subscribe to the goal of educational excellence. We hope that the annual publication of *Teachers and Curriculum* will stimulate and contribute to such critical analysis.

References

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