

## Acceptance or challenge?

*A review of*

### ***The Curriculum In the Classroom***

*Hugh Barr and Peter Gordon (eds) (1995) Palmerston North:  
Dunmore Press 248 pp.*

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The meaning of curriculum and how it is implemented and experienced in the classroom have long been of interest to the education community. This interest has probably been fuelled by the many curricula changes that have occurred in recent years, together with the emergence of different learning theories. Despite the changes, there does seem to be a dearth of useful resource material to enable both pre-service and practising primary teachers in New Zealand to understand how these curricula changes differ in important ways from what went before. The book reviewed here is intended to help fill this gap. Teacher educators, of course, have a professional responsibility to keep up with curriculum change and curriculum theory in their own specific field of interest and expertise, so it will be no surprise that they comprise most of the authors of the articles in the book. Their hope is that the text will provide primary teachers with a worthwhile starting point for further professional development.

Since primary teachers are responsible for teaching all areas of the curriculum, the book is divided into distinctive chapters which cover the different areas of learning - English, mathematics, science, social studies, health, art, music and physical education. Indeed English rates three chapters and mathematics two. Two notable omissions are Maori and Technology. The editors, in their introduction, remind readers that although the book is divided into subject areas, this is for academic convenience rather than for any sound educational reason. In addition to the focus on curriculum areas, there is a beginning chapter on the primary school curriculum, and a concluding chapter on thematic approaches to teaching.

In her forward to the book, Alcorn makes it clear that, "Curriculum is a slippery and problematic term with many layers of meaning." Barr and Gordon, in their introduction, outline briefly some of these meanings. They emphasise that, "The ultimate test of the curriculum is what happens in the classroom" and conclude that, "...curriculum development and application are part of the daily life of every teacher." These kinds of suggestions are useful to help us recognise that there is more to a curriculum than an official document.

Actually, understanding the nature of the curriculum is quite complex. Although

there seems to be an expectation in the book that teachers need to be aware that the nature of a delivered curriculum is greater than the sum of its parts, the connections between each of the chapters are not made explicit. Rather it is up to readers to make the complex connections for themselves.

The first chapter begins with focus questions about the curriculum and its origins. It gives a case study of a practising teacher making decisions about the organisation of a school day, and the changes that can be made to a previously made plan. This provides a platform for asking more global questions about the nature of curriculum, where it comes from, and how it fits with the New Zealand national curriculum. A brief historical overview gives the reader an awareness of how the National curriculum evolved but makes the point that, although teachers have to work within imposed restraints, they have the scope to decide what happens in their classrooms with respect to curriculum design, implementation and assessment.

Chapter 2 entitled "Teaching and Learning English" outlines the principles and aims of the curriculum area. It then gives some suggested teaching approaches but makes the point that teachers are influenced by their beliefs, which, in turn, affects the implementation of a classroom programme. The chapter focusses more on the teaching of writing than reading. The third chapter also looks at reading and writing. Historical background is given to the development of the approaches that have been a significant part of New Zealand primary classrooms. A common feature of this chapter and several others is the provision of background information to enable readers to obtain a sense that curriculum in the classroom does not just happen, but rather evolves over time. As a result, many of the references provide information about the historical detail. Unfortunately, there is little reference to the more recent research that has contributed to developments in these fields.

Another common feature of many of the chapters is the provision of advice about an approach to planning. Much of it is practical, useful, and easy to read. However, there is a danger that an approach could be used as a "recipe", especially when only one has been offered, or seemingly 'approved'. For example, although the Planning Sheet in Chapter 6 (implementing the mathematics curriculum) indicates that it is a "suggested approach" - one which does not appear to have any special merit - there are no alternatives offered, so pre-service teachers in particular could easily gain the impression that this is the 'approved' approach.

The final chapter about Thematic Approaches to Teaching suggests that there are some advantages and drawbacks to this type of teaching, but specific details about these strengths and weaknesses are not provided. The introduction strongly suggests that this approach is the "most successful means of application", but there is no critical appraisal of this position. Rather there is a description of how it can be implemented. The links to learning are useful, in so far as they provide some interesting insights into

some current learning theories, but perhaps some thought could have been given to curriculum theory and development as well. Using a thematic approach is but one way of implementing the curriculum.

In an eclectic series of chapters it is difficult to provide enough information about each learning area without overwhelming the reader. Several authors have used minimal references which creates the impression that their chapters contain little more than opinion. However, a positive aspect of the book is the way many of the authors have provided very readable accounts of their subject, thus demystifying a number of the components of the learning areas. This could be reassuring to a pre-service or practising teacher who is trying to understand the rather complex nature of a particular learning area, and wishes to know more. The book attempts to provide an overview of the curriculum, and as such is a useful resource. It is unlikely to be seen as a definitive text.