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Contours of contested curriculum

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CONTOURS OF CONTESTED CURRICULUM

COMMENTARY

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Curricula are fiercely contested documents. As Apple (1993) reminds us, curricula are the social product of contending forces in which the knowledge conveyed generally reflects what is valued by the powerful classes in society. Yet, in recent years in New Zealand, there has been a silence over the role that curricula play in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. The above set of five papers in *Teachers and Curriculum* is very timely, drawing our attention back again to the importance of curriculum content and design at a time when curriculum has been brought back into the spotlight.

In 2021, New Zealand is set to refresh the curriculum for the first time in 14 years. Released in 2007, the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) was heralded as innovative and ambitious amidst claims that through this curriculum students will “learn how to learn ... innovate and problem-solve and become creators of new knowledge” (Trevett & McKenzie-Minifie, 2007). At the time, it was claimed to be one of the most widely consulted curriculum documents in the world, with up to 14,000 people involved in the process of curriculum development. Now in 2021, the New Zealand curriculum has been found to need a ‘refresh’ following a considerable period of time without review. Led by the initial development of the Aotearoa NZ Histories Curriculum in 2021, all curriculum areas will be refreshed along similar lines in the coming years, with the goal of full implementation of this curriculum by 2025.

The papers in this issue highlight the complexity of curriculum design and the need to recognise curriculum as a product of contending social, political and historical forces, or as White says, “born of a particular social and historical moment” (p. 46). They understand that the curriculum is not a neutral bystander in the educational process, instead, curricula are inherently political—in both their construction and implementation. As beginning teachers, the authors of these papers note that the NZC had several implementation challenges, and curricula design is also instructive and influences many aspects of education. Drawing on their own experiences, they point out how the structure, content and framing of the New Zealand curriculum, and the discourses underpinning it, has considerable consequences for teachers, students, curriculum coherence and issues of equity, of justice, of wellbeing and of pedagogy.

The authors of these papers outline several critiques of the 2007 NZC, drawing from their critical analysis and experiences. First and foremost, they point out many examples of neoliberal discourses within the NZC. Neoliberalism is a prevailing discourse of many educational policies around the world. Neoliberal forms of social and economic policies are characterised by the withdrawal or deregulation of the state, the enhancement of the role of the private sector and the prevalence of the logic of the market. Reflecting on the Australian educational scene, Raewyn Connell (2013) describes a ‘cascade’ of neoliberal ideas which have infiltrated and shaped educational policies in recent years, requiring institutions to conduct themselves more like profit-seeking firms—with an underlying market logic—than providers of knowledge, skills and citizenship capabilities for a healthy democracy.

These ideas have become prevalent in school curricula where statements of intent are closely aligned with market outcomes (employment, trainability, skills and dispositions), and a closely associated

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Pages 55–58

emphasis on measurement, ranking and efficiency (Au, 2011). Increasingly, these neoliberal forms of education policy extend beyond the nation state to the world, and a country's educational system are ranked, classified and compared in order to compete for the emerging international marketplace of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). As Davis, Prescott, White and Martelli note, the NZC's frequent references to the employability of students and how it is aligned with human capital goals (Martelli), with close connections with industry, the economy (Prescott) and employment (Davis) is of concern. White also highlights how individualism has a strong discursive influence across curriculum documents whereby the individual is separated out from their position within society and communities. She argues that the New Zealand curriculum perpetuates this conception of society and aims to educate a generation of individual students.

The papers by these emerging teachers also highlight implementation challenges faced by teachers as a result of curriculum design features of the NZC. As with most educational issues, these are complex and difficult to fix. A key issue raised in these papers (see Deane and White) is how open the curriculum is to interpretation. New Zealand, along with a handful of nations, has one of the least prescribed, most 'open' curricula in the world (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014; Sinnema, 2015; Wood & Sheehan, 2020). While many have celebrated this autonomy and freedom in curriculum design, there are growing concerns that this openness means that there is little curriculum coherency or erratic coverage of key learning means that some students are missing out on learning that is important to them and their communities. As Sinnema (2015) states, New Zealand's open curriculum currently has created "the risk of jeopardising the curriculum entitlement that a prescriptive curriculum ensures for students" (p. 974). Thus, many students leave school without accessing a valuable core of effective knowledge that can 'take them further' which can significantly impact upon their future educational pathways.

Concerns have also been raised that knowledge has been marginalised in the NZC. Priestley and Sinnema (2014) compared the presence of knowledge in the NZC and the Scottish national curriculum, before and after their most recent iterations. They concluded that

this empirical analysis partially supports the claim that these curricula have downgraded knowledge—they have greatly reduced the specification of content, de-emphasised the importance of knowledge in relation to other aspects (skills, competencies, etc.), and failed to provide explicit guidance on processes to the practitioners charged with developing them. (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014, p. 71)

The papers illustrate this with examples of how they, as beginning teachers, experienced this openness and autonomy. For example, while the key competencies were valued (e.g., White), there were no details on how they were to be taught and integrated with other aspects of the curriculum. This, White argues, means that how teachers should interpret and integrate key competencies with other aspects of curricula design, such as the learning areas, "remain hidden unless schools deliberately bring them to light" (p. 49). Research in New Zealand has confirmed this ambiguity and lack of coherence. For example, ERO (2019) examined the integration of key competencies in primary schools and found that there was high variability between schools in their interpretation and that most had emphasised key competencies as a means to enhance student behaviour rather than deepen cognitive learning.

A second key issue is the reliance on a very qualified teacher workforce. The NZC's weakly prescribed curriculum means that the process of curriculum implementation places a huge demand on teachers to understand and integrate multiple and disparate elements of our curriculum (such as values, principles, key competencies and learning areas statements, as described above and in these papers) in their curriculum design and programmes. This places a very heavy workload on teachers, as it is almost impossible to support teachers through rich curriculum activities and assessment exemplars, and nor are teachers well trained for such sophisticated curriculum design processes which means that they often respond by attending to elements which resonate most with their existing values and practices (Aitken, 2006; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002; Zohar & Hipkins, 2018).

Third, these factors bring us to an associated issue of equity. All papers touch on this—recognising that weak signals of curriculum content can fail to signal the type of knowledge that cannot be left to chance

(Young, 2008), and that poor curriculum design and high requirements for teacher capacity can create very uneven educational contours and outcomes as “it presupposes expertise in curriculum that may not be widely [or] evenly spread” (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013, pp. 128–129).

The analysis of the NZC by these beginning teachers insightfully has exposed many of the reasons given for the curriculum refresh in 2021. The reasons for this refresh were outlined in the announcement of the curriculum refresh in February 2021 by the Associate Ministers of Education, Kelvin Davis and Jan Tinetti, herself a former Deputy Principal. Some key directions were signalled and included:

1. [The need] to be clearer about the knowledge, skills and capabilities learners need to progress through their schooling.
2. A refresh [of] each learning area to develop supports to ensure effective implementation. We’ll be working to reduce the large number of achievement objectives we have in the current curriculum and develop a smaller number of progress statements to make sure our learners are reaching the milestones they need to.
3. [The design of] a truly connected curriculum by bringing together the key competencies with the learning areas. Up until now, teachers have been left to navigate the key competencies, bringing them to life within learning areas. Our refreshed New Zealand curriculum will bring these together, making it easier for teachers and engaging for learners.
4. Strengthening Te Marautanga o Aotearoa in partnership with whānau, hapū and iwi will continue to ensure marau ā-kura reflects the vision and aspirations that whānau have for their tamariki to form the basis of their marau ā-kura. (Davis & Tinetti, 2021)

The ambitions for this curriculum refresh are high as well as the stakes, with evidence of a steady decline in reading, writing, maths and science in most international testing comparisons of New Zealand in the past decade (Long & Te, 2019). As the papers in this series of five conclude, curriculum design is strategic and influential and therefore has potential to undermine or support the goal of educational transformation. It is therefore of utmost importance that the Curriculum Refresh addresses the issues raised in these papers, and provides a chance for future students to achieve with greater inclusion and equity an education that enriches every possibility for them to emerge as knowledgeable, critical, compassionate and active citizens of our democracy.

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