

# Teachers and Curriculum



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VOLUME 10 2007



# TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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# SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM, 2007

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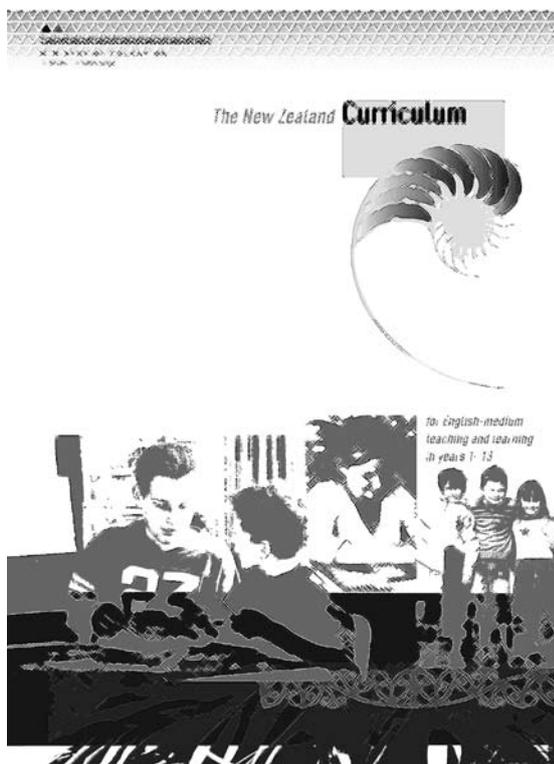
On November 6, 2007, Prime Minister Helen Clark, Minister of Education, Steven Maharey and the latter's newly appointed successor Chris Carter, collectively launched *The New Zealand Curriculum*. The release of this 45-page follow-up document to the draft consultation curriculum published in July 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2006) was eagerly awaited both within and beyond the compulsory schooling sector, because its publication had been set initially for September 2007 and because the second document was to specify the curriculum to be implemented over the 2008-2009 period (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.4). From 2010, all English-medium state and state integrated schools — not private/independent schools, by omission — will be delivering the curriculum (Harris, 2007, p.5; Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.6).

A separate Māori-medium draft curriculum document — the first to have been created specifically for education in the Māori medium — was released later, on November 15, 2007, for public consultation (Harris, 2007, p.5). The Ministry of Education claims that *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* is "not a direct translation of the *New Zealand Curriculum*." Instead, it rightly acknowledges that "[the] Māori language is the vehicle that supports cultural practices and is the expression for aspects of the Māori identity" (Ministry of Education, 2007c, p.70). Consultation on the latter document is scheduled to end on April 18, 2008.

It is inevitable that direct comparisons will be made between the 2006 and 2007 curriculum documents, to ascertain what has been retained and modified, ostensibly as a result of the 15-month public consultation process (see, e.g., "New curriculum launched", 2007, p. 12). Underpinning both publications is a taken-for-granted assumption that the five specified key competencies, eight learning areas, eight principles and the set of eight values *will* provide the platform for students' learning from years 1-13 inclusive, for the duration of the twenty-first century. For example, the Secretary for Education, Karen Sewell, states that having a different generation of students in the twenty-first century "necessitated a new curriculum, one sufficiently flexible to accommodate societal and educational change" (McKenzie-Minifie, 2007, p.A4). But only in the *New Zealand Education Gazette* is it mentioned that there will be "an ongoing review and development process to ensure that the [2007] curriculum remains relevant" (Sewell, 2007b, p.15).

The premise about curricular longevity will need revisiting soon, though, in light of Maharey's bold pronouncement that "the pace of social and economic change is faster than ever before" (Maharey, 2007, p.1) and on account of Sewell's confident assertions that "there has been no slowing of the pace of social change" (Sewell, 2007a, p. 4) and that "our education system has begun to chart a significant new direction for all New Zealanders" (Sewell, 2007c, p.A12). At this stage we suggest that considerable skepticism should be adopted, for, as a prominent historian of New Zealand education, David McKenzie, has reminded us, "continuity is a fact of life in [our] educational history" (McKenzie, 1984, p.8). He outlined his thesis as follows:

*Nothing, not even the most exciting and apparently revolutionary educational proposal, arrives on the scene de novo. Periods of intense energy and drama can occur. But these do not negate the claim of continuity. All participants in the educational process are the products themselves of past experience and tradition. No more than anyone else are they suddenly able 'to put education on a new road.'*



In short, if change proves to be as profound and rapid as Sewell and Maharey assume it to be, then the 2007 document may be very short lived.

We sincerely hope that the New Zealand public have not become so accustomed to hearing the mantra of 'constant and unprecedented change' (and other mantras) being chanted rhythmically and/or regularly by politicians, officials, and other parties that the capacity — and, perhaps, the willingness — to discern fact from fiction, or reality from rhetoric, is seriously diminished. To put the point another way, the ability to ask searching questions of those persons and groups who seem intent upon citing this mantra unthinkingly is an indispensable, core component of intelligent citizenship in a participatory democracy. To this end, McKenzie shrewdly observed nearly a generation ago that "most people who care to comment on the matter [of education] think that they live at a time of bewildering change" (McKenzie, 1984, p.8). He argued:

*Spokespersons seem often to ignore the role of continuity in the process of education, favouring instead the word 'change' which they use like drugs to signal elation, despair, or bewilderment. The word is sometimes used as a talisman of those who urge reforms, sometimes a self-justification for those who simply weary of the status quo. (McKenzie, 1984, pp.8-9)*

If the Ministry of Education is sincere in declaring that students' "intellectual curiosity" and their ability to "reflect on their own learning" and to "challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions" are vitally important "key competencies" for New Zealand youth (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.12) then we might reasonably expect critical analysis by students (and teachers) of several mantras contained in, and beyond, *The New Zealand Curriculum*. It remains to be seen, nevertheless, how officialdom will respond to such interrogations post-2008. We suggest that policymakers and other interest groups ought to pay particular attention to considering the possible consequences and limitations of advocating a change agenda uncritically or unthinkingly, a major aspect of which may involve confusing change with reform. It may be necessary, therefore, for students and adults alike to begin to think more about the nature and the legacy of their own thinking. The outcome should be less confidence in, and acceptance of, the pronouncements and activities of policymakers and other groups associated with schools and schooling whenever they wish to prescribe a curriculum for a future society, one whose form and orientation remains indefinite, if official rhetoric is to be believed.

Although we appreciate that *all* curriculum documents are, by definition, prospective in their orientation and scope — the 2007 one is no different in this respect — we are critical of the implication in the latest publication that its application will be for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Nowhere in the 2007 document is this impression dispelled, regrettably. Brief reference is made to the ephemeral nature of this curriculum by the Secretary for Education only (Sewell, 2007b).

Because a national curriculum is, *ipso facto*, a public document, it is entirely predictable that different interest groups will continue to try to insert their own ideas about what they maintain is essential for any revamped curriculum to work better (i.e., 'more efficiently') than its predecessor(s) (McKenzie, 1983). These ideas may be manifested in a learning area or subject domain, in a vision statement, in a curriculum principle, and/or in a statement about attitudes and values. To this end, there is evidence of an attempt by *The New Zealand Curriculum* authors to include various perspectives, some of which may sit uncomfortably with others. For instance, "enterprise" and an "entrepreneurial [orientation]" are advocated as one of four desirable "future-focused issues" which purport to be "rich source[s] of learning opportunities" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.39). The contrary may prove to be the case, however, because no argument is presented to support these assumptions. Furthermore, no mention is made of possible (and real) tensions between this enterprising and entrepreneurial approach and social, political, cultural and other kinds of "sustainability" as well as notions of "citizenship" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.39), "integrity", "equity", and respect for oneself, other people, and for human rights (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.39). While it is possible that these conflicts or disagreements *could* be explored through critical engagement with a variety of associated issues, there is little in the 2007 curriculum to indicate that conflicts or disagreements have been anticipated.

One exception, however, relates to *The New Zealand Curriculum* authors' recognition that "dialogue between the school and its community" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 10) will influence a given school's curriculum, philosophy, structures, relationships, and so forth. This statement is uplifted from the 2006 draft

curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 10), which acknowledges the possibility of "discuss[ing] disagreements that arise from differences in values and negotiat[ing] solutions" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 10).

For some unstated reason though, the phrase "in a diverse, democratic society in the twenty-first century" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.10) used in the 2006 curriculum statement on values does not appear in the 2007 publication. The same applies to the deletion of the following passages: students "contribute to the growth of its [New Zealand's] economy", students' education being geared towards "[New Zealand's] knowledge-based society", learners "mak[ing] a difference", and pupils becoming "innovative learners and thinkers" (Ministry of Education, 2006, pp. 8-9). While educators and other interested parties are likely to closely interrogate such deletions—as indeed they should—we suspect that any modifications to the 2006 document may echo concern expressed by some sectors of Aotearoa/ New Zealand society about the overt mention in that publication of a knowledge economy orientation and mantra, and of an assumed relationship between educational provision and performance and a nation's economic growth prospects. Subsequent analysis of the more than 10,000 feedback submissions received by the Ministry (McKenzie-Minifie, 2007, p.A4; Sewell, 2007a, p.4) may reveal the extent to which adjustments were made to appease certain influential groups or individuals. Presently, however, it appears that these changes are mostly semantic because a knowledge economy/knowledge society agenda, embracing enterprise and entrepreneurial behaviour and an understanding of "[students'] role in the economy" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.30), is still abundantly clear in the 2007 document.

If the Ministry of Education is sincere in categorizing critical thinking as a key competency within which "intellectual curiosity" and the challenging of perceptions and premises feature prominently, (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.12) then the development of a capacity for students to think more deeply about their own as well as other people's thinking augurs well for a study of Economics under the Social Sciences banner—indeed, for any subject of study. Students, for example, are expected to gain an understanding of "how people seek and have sought economic growth through business, enterprise, and innovation" (Ministry of Education, 2007a, Social Sciences: Level Five chart), to "[appreciate] how economic concepts and models provide a means

of analysing contemporary New Zealand issues” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, Social Sciences: Level Seven chart), and to “[comprehend] that well-functioning markets are efficient but that governments may need to intervene where markets fail to deliver efficient or equitable outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, Social Sciences: Level Eight chart). In so doing it seems reasonable to expect that classroom conversations in the near future will be vigorous and intense in this and in other subject areas. We also anticipate that students and teachers will discuss points of intersection between different learning areas—for example, Economics (under Social Sciences) and Technology, where they could explore a variety of economic and social issues relating to the speed with which some kinds of electronic technology become redundant, who the winners and losers are likely to be, and what the consequences might be for consumers of modern-day technology.

Much, though, will depend on how teachers, students, principals, and boards of trustees respond individually and collectively to the Ministry’s advocacy of an engaging, meaningful, challenging, and forward-looking curriculum for all learners (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.9). Considerable store is placed in the document on “effective teachers” and on “effective pedagogy” (p.34) as the means to best promote student learning, but there is little consideration of *students’* obligations or responsibilities in the teaching and learning social contract (see, e.g., Ministry of Education, 2007a, pp. 34-35).

Lest readers think that our assessment of *The New Zealand Curriculum* is predominantly negative, we now wish to identify several aspects that deserve praise. It is pleasing to see the Ministry recommends that broad learning area statements (Ministry of Education, 2007a,



pp.18-33), rather than the achievement objectives outlined in the document’s charts, be “the starting point for developing programmes of learning suited to students’ needs and interests” (p.38), and that “excessive high-stakes assessment in years 11-13 is to be avoided” (p.41). Nonetheless, it must be said that similar sentiments were expressed by the New Zealand Thomas Committee (Department of Education, 1944) over 60 years ago and, more recently, by the Brice Committee (Department of Education, 1987). They fell frequently on deaf ears.

Another positive feature of the 2007 curriculum concerns the retention of the “continuity and change” strand to the Social Sciences learning area (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.22; Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.30), wherein students are to learn about the different ways in which “past events, experiences, and actions... have been interpreted [and reinterpreted] over time” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.30). Assigning a lesser role to ‘presentism’ and to ‘futurism’ in the study of history is also commendable, as is support for a four-step “social inquiry approach” (p.30) which owes much to the work of the internationally renowned American educational philosopher, John Dewey, albeit without acknowledgement. Furthermore, the description of the history component of Level Seven and Level Eight Social Sciences is most impressive—it neatly captures the subjective element(s) of historical inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2007a, Social Sciences: Level Seven and Level Eight charts).

The same holds true for the description of the “nature of technology” component of the Technology learning area. Within it, we are told that “[students can] learn to critique the impact of technology on societies and the environment and to explore how developments and outcomes are valued by different peoples in different times” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.32; Ministry of Education, 2007a, Technology: Level Three and Level Five charts). Because the achievement objectives for Level One Technology properly reflect the fact that “technological outcomes are products or systems developed by people”; that those for Level Five recognize that “people’s perceptions and acceptance of technology impact on technological developments”; and that the Level Eight Technology achievement objectives state that students will come to understand “how interventions have consequences, known and unknown, intended and unintended”, there appear to be good grounds for suggesting that as a learning area Technology can avoid becoming a cargo-cult, functionalist, and ends-oriented domain—one that ought to serve as an ideal palliative for a multitude of perceived and/or real societal ills, in some people’s thinking.

For the great majority of teachers, the statement that *The New Zealand Curriculum* “is a framework rather than a detailed plan”—one in which teachers “have considerable flexibility when determining the detail” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.37)—is likely to be greeted enthusiastically. But for a small minority the absence of a comprehensive syllabus for each learning area could present some challenges. Some teachers may wish to use existing syllabuses, although in a modified form, for guidance while NCEA requirements for Year 11-13 students look set to continue to influence the work of the senior secondary school substantially. Taken as a whole, the 2007 curriculum provides primary and secondary teachers with a fairly specific outline of the type of work they are expected to undertake in the nation’s classrooms from 2008. Whether the result in every school will be effective teaching and reflective learning (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.34) remains to be seen.

Once students and teachers recognize some limits to the extent to which their work can and should be future-focused, when they understand that the 2007 curriculum is necessarily a document ‘of the moment’ (like any other), and when it is appreciated that tensions or conflicts can and will arise within and between the different learning areas, then there should be a wider realization that some principles and objectives outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* may not be translated from rhetoric to reality in the manner and to the degree envisaged by the Ministry of Education. If, and/or when, this occurs then the 2007 curriculum experience is likely to echo that of numerous curriculum documents in our lengthy schooling history. Accordingly, it is disappointing to see the Ministry boldly declaring that the new curriculum “is designed to stand the test of time” and that it will “[prepare] students for the world of tomorrow” (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.114). We trust that the New Zealand public will begin to critique such empty rhetoric.

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