

# Teachers and Curriculum



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# TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

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**TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM** is an annual publication of the School of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

It includes articles about curriculum issues, research in the area of curriculum and informed curriculum practice. Reviews of curriculum related books may also be included.

The Opinion item is contributed by a leading New Zealand educationalist.

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*Teachers and Curriculum* provides an avenue for the publication of papers that:

- raise important issues to do with the curriculum
- report on research in the area of curriculum
- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
- review books that have a curriculum focus.

This peer reviewed journal welcomes papers on any of these from tertiary staff and students, teachers and other educators who have a special interest in curriculum matters. Papers on research may be full papers, or if time or space is at a premium, research notes, that is a 2,000 word summary.

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# COMMENT

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCHOOLS WITH NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY CURRICULUM AND TOOLS

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO**

*"Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."*

**Marc Prensky (2001)**

## *Abstract*

*Schools are frequently expected to provide the solution to a range of emerging social problems.*

*Significant societal change has questioned the relevance of traditional curricula and approaches to teaching.*

*It is suggested that a relevant curriculum for the twenty-first century will give appropriate attention to students' sense of identity, the increasing multiculturalism of our society, technological methods of communication and information management, and personalised and individualised systems of instruction and learning.*

A recent spate of tragic events in New Zealand surrounding the abuse of children was the catalyst for a national soul search that sought to identify reasons for these societal wrongs. The string of events appeared to rock the nation at its core, resulting in a nationwide outcry for answers – What was happening in our society that caused human beings to turn on innocent and vulnerable children in such vile ways? For many weeks, newspapers printed letters of outrage in their public opinion columns, politicians rampaged with propositions of policy and law, the media reported yet more cases of horrific human violation, and accusations were hurled around radio talkback programmes, community groups, and lounge rooms. It was more than evident to all – enough was enough. During the chaos, an all too familiar voice eventually broke through, and the large majority of people were able to relax, knowing that the finger of fault was being pointed away from them. It all came back to education – young people could not possibly be learning what they should in schools or this type of behaviour would not be occurring in our communities. It appeared that, yet again, the public had deemed that educators and the system they worked within were failing us all.

At much the same time, details emerged from a New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) survey, revealing that one in seven primary school teachers was hit by their students (Croft, 2007), again highlighting the worrying aggressive behaviour of our youth. These issues sparked a series of media articles containing interviews with local educators and community leaders regarding the plight of our young people. Suggestions were made that some children were being expected to hold the responsibilities of adults resulting in a loss of innocence, while damaging domestic situations were impacting on the school environment, and parents were displaying verbally aggressive behaviour in front of their children (Udy, 2007). Other reasons were cited, such as the breakdown of family units, abuse in the home, and a generation possessing very different values. Tauranga psychotherapist, Augustina Driessen, suggested that young people were "out of control" due to a lack of boundaries and consequences, and a lack of care or empathy for others (Bay of Plenty Times, 2007). Yet through all the attempts to make sense of what society has apparently become, a common thread indicated that, in fact, life in the twenty-first century is qualitatively different to life in the past. Young people are living in a world that is radically altered, and we are very quickly moving into a future that will likely present issues and challenges to both society and education that we cannot even begin to fathom today. The reasons for this may be debated, but the important question for educators to consider is whether we are implementing a curriculum that is adequately preparing today's learners for life now and in the future.

In a speech delivered in 2007, the then New Zealand Minister of Education, Steve Maharey, stated that education had to change if it was to meet contemporary needs (Maharey, 2007). He went on to propose that, in the face of overwhelming change, we cannot continue to use last century's model to educate learners. This sentiment is echoed in our national education documents, with core subjects being addressed, along with values and attitudes that are believed to reflect New Zealand society in the early twenty-first century (Ministry of Education 2005a; 2005b; 2006). A real attempt has been made in the recently revised national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007b) to identify values that reflect current issues. These are not only explicitly stated, but should also be "evident in the philosophy, organisation, and relationships of the curriculum, schools and classrooms" (Ministry of Education, 2005b). It is understood that the national curriculum is the framework that informs both school and classroom curriculums, allowing the flexibility to translate these guidelines to the contexts and communities in which

they are situated. Nevertheless, Dryden (2000) claims that if Rip Van Winkle were to wake up today after sleeping for 130 years, the only thing he would recognise would be the typical school classroom. He believes that schools are attempting to “graft 21<sup>st</sup> century technology onto a 19<sup>th</sup> century school model.” However, Riegle (2004) suggests that when society changes, the curriculum of schools also changes. Within New Zealand, current issues, including social, economic, cultural, demographic, gender-related, technological and environmental aspects, are continuously shaping attitudes and belief systems (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 28). As a result, the way we practice and interact changes, what we value adjusts, and this impacts on education and the messages that are being sent through our school system.

Four key aspects appear to be consistently referred to as integral to twenty-first century learning, as they reflect changes in society in the new millennium. These include identity (Hattie, 2003; Hipkins, 2005), multiculturalism (Ministry of Education, 2002; Whyte, 2001), technology (Brown, 2000; Prensky, 2001) and personalised or individual learning styles (Ministry of Education, 2007a; Prensky, 2005). The revised curriculum outlines a vision that young people will be positive in their personal and national identity, inclusive of other cultures and their contributions, adept with new technologies and passionate about becoming lifelong learners (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Although these aspects can be seen as largely complementing each other in regards to the requirements for twenty-first century learning, some literature suggests a clash amongst the four components. For instance, a New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Bolstad, Gilbert, Vaughan, Darr & Cooper, 2006) report states that, at one end of the continuum, there are those who think that digital technologies are “empowering young people to develop new ways of thinking, being, and acting in the world” (p. 11). At the other end of this same spectrum are those who believe that young people’s engagement with ICT and other technologies may “interfere with their abilities to think critically and behave socially” (p. 57). Brown (2000) outlines that the latter situation is unlikely to transpire, as he believes that technology actually increases social circles and creates opportunity for learning to occur, with individuals better able to connect with global experts in specific areas of interest. The advancement in technology has resulted in our worlds shrinking – we are no longer restricted to social connections within our own neighbourhoods or communities, as the Internet and other tools have enabled us to be able to instantly socialise or liaise with people from around the world (Hipkins, 2005; Prensky, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, the tragedies that occurred recently highlighted deficiencies in the area of respect for self and others. It is evident that individuals need to learn to develop a sense of self, build esteem and efficacy, and take pride in who they are, their social and cultural backgrounds, and what they value and believe. When people have respect for self, they are able to show respect and empathy for others, a trait seemingly lacking in the lives of the abusers referred to previously. Likewise, when individuals have a sense of where they came from, they presumably are

clearer about where they may be heading. Oyserman (2004) suggests that an individual’s history plays an important role in their identity, influencing current behaviour and wellbeing. When individuals are not secure in their concept of self, they are more likely to be vulnerable to negative pressure. This has implications for educators, as assisting students to develop self esteem and efficacy may provide the protective mechanism against delinquency and other antisocial or destructive behaviours. As Stanley (2003) points out, young people who have a propensity toward antisocial behaviour tend to seek out others with similar inclinations, and form peer groups that solidify antisocial identities. It may be that the recent abuse tragedies occurred as a result of identity issues such as these, and that teachers do indeed have a critical role in diverting social damage that has the potential to reverberate across generations.

The Ministry of Education (1999) outlines the importance of promoting cultural differences and valuing diversity, not just to foster positive self esteem and identity, but also to remove barriers to learning. As New Zealand becomes an increasingly multicultural society, the capacity to value diversity and empathise with others is becoming an essential skill for learning to live with people from differing cultural backgrounds. Fraser, McGee and Thrupp (2001) state that schools will need to assist students to understand cultural differences in order to achieve respect and cooperation, and to allow diversity to thrive. Campbell (2000) argues that, although cultural diversity is now acknowledged and ‘celebrated’ in national education policies, there may still be an assumption amongst educators that coming from a minority cultural background is a disadvantage. This underlying attitude could send conflicting messages to students from minority groups who, on one hand, have been embraced into the system, but on the other, are limited by racial stereotyping that underestimates their ability to cross the cultural barriers and that frustrates their ability to succeed. Likewise, mainstream students may be subtly reminded of their ‘superiority’, negating the very intention of educating them to embrace and value those from other cultures. These hidden messages, if they exist, will need to be addressed if multiculturalism is to be a predominant value in the twenty-first century.

Changes produced by information communication technology (ICT) have caused a paradigm shift from the Industrial Age to the information or knowledge age. Riegle (2004) observes that the Industrial



Age curriculum was composed of core subjects, widely known as “the three ‘R’s” (reading, writing and arithmetic). The curriculum of the twentieth century, through its systems and processes, taught attitudes and abilities such as obedience, punctuality and dependability, as these were values sought after in the workforce. Gilbert (2005) argues that this industrial age configuration of education is now redundant. This is echoed by Smith and Lovat (2003), who claim that we have only witnessed the beginnings of the impact of technology, and that many of the traditional structures of the Industrial Age have indeed become obsolete. Knowledge in the age of information has new meaning, and students need higher order thinking skills that will enable them to be independent learners all their lives. Riegle describes the Information Age as having a curriculum composed of “the three I’s” – information acquisition, information analysis and information display. Therefore, the discourse of schooling should instill values demanded by a technologically oriented world, such as self reliance, initiative, logic, precision, speed, learning, imagination, humility, communication, cleverness, vision and creativity. A related issue is the exposure to vast quantities of information, as learners have virtually unlimited access to all manner of knowledge at their fingertips. The twenty-first century learner needs to develop the skills to manage this information, or to identify reliable sources, obtain accurate information, and apply it effectively, through the development and use of critical and creative thinking skills (Gilbert, 2005; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003).

Meanwhile, debate rages about whether or not New Zealand education is actually adapting to meet the demands of the rapidly changing information world (Dryden, 2000; Gilbert, 2005; Hipkins, 2004). Limitations in this area are self evident. Technology is available in varying degrees, its distribution appearing to be school specific and dependant on variables such as decile, community support and funding. The integration of technology into other learning areas lacks quality in many classrooms, as there appears to be a general lack of expertise amongst educators, with students frequently being more knowledgeable than their teachers. Computers and other technological tools are often not upgraded regularly, and there is a general undersupply of these available for the numbers of students needing to use them. These realities imply that the professed emphasis on ICT education for twenty-first century learning may not actually be deemed as significant a priority as is conveyed by politicians and leaders in education. The revised curriculum

document introduces the term ‘e-learning’, which describes learning that is supported by ICT (Ministry of Education, 2007b). It outlines how this approach has the potential to support learning, given the significant impact of ICT on the world in which young people live. However, challenges associated with ICT, as discussed above, may mean that adjusting traditional methods of teaching to best meet the twenty-first century learner’s needs will be severely compromised. There is a definite need for the government to provide funding to address the deficiencies in this area if New Zealand education is to be effective in the knowledge age. As Bolstad and her colleagues state:

*If the educational system continues to not meet the needs of the digital generation, they will simply disengage from traditional school learning. If true, this has major implications, not only for the individuals concerned, but for schools, public education, and society in general. (Bolstad, Gilbert, Vaughan, Darr & Cooper, 2006, p. 17)*

The current and increasing emphasis on catering for different learning styles is encapsulated in a variety of catch phrases, including personalised learning, individualised learning, authentic learning, curriculum integration and student voice. Robinson (2006) suggests that learning is a personal act, and that all children learn differently. The notion that one size fits all has given way to the stressing of different styles of learning which, when nurtured, equip children with an intrinsic motivation to learn (Dickinson, 2000). James Beane (1997) suggests that curriculum integration, as opposed to the single subject approach to teaching and learning, may be the key to addressing different learning styles. Beane believes that curriculum integration provides the vehicle to equip students to think critically, and to motivate them towards social action, as learning becomes relevant to their worldview rather than merely an assortment of fragmented facts. Skilful teachers who have knowledge of both curriculum and the needs of their students, are able to negotiate the curriculum with students to maximise participation, engagement, and depth of learning (Boomer, Lester, Onore & Cook, 1994).

As our world is experiencing global changes at a rapid pace, learners need to have opportunities to acquire the relevant skills to interact with it in a positive way. The revised curriculum proposes that teachers promote student learning by facilitating shared learning, and allowing students to actively contribute to negotiation and participation in classroom activities (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Education in the twenty-first century is not about acquiring facts or mastering skills, but about developing a propensity towards curiosity and critical thinking, creativity and perseverance, equity and respect. Hopefully, the intentions of personalised learning will be achieved and demonstrated in measurable outcomes, as accountability is increasingly demanded in the emerging educational era.

It may actually be impossible to keep up with changes in the information age, but the altered national curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007b) provides one source of evidence that New Zealand education is striving for relevance in today’s world. However, in order to meet the demands of the new era, educators must remain open to change, globally minded and responsive to advances in technology that they may not easily comprehend (Dryden 2000; Campbell, 2001). Recent tragedies involving abuse highlighted the nature of the world children are growing up in currently, resulting in implications for education in the future in terms of personal and national identity. Increasing multiculturalism changes the face of society regularly, along with constantly emerging technologies. Ideas about how individuals learn, and how they can best be nurtured are shaping approaches to teaching. With the right outlook on twenty-first century education, educators can transform industrial minded ideologies into those required for the Information Age. As posed by Hipkins (2004),

*What we need is the will to rethink purposes and priorities for school learning. We are at a potential turning point. Will we head imaginatively, creatively, boldly, confidently into a ‘knowledge society’ future? Or will conservative, traditional curriculum influences and power structures, along with familiar teaching practices and ways of organising school timetables, keep us trapped in nineteenth and twentieth century perspectives that so many curriculum commentators say have passed their ‘use-by’ date? (p. 12)*

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