

Teachers and Curriculum



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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

KAI AKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM DRAFT, 2006

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The draft national curriculum, released on 31 July 2006 by Steve Maharey, Minister of Education, has drawn a prompt response from educators, school teachers and principals, newspaper editors, and from the general public. This is hardly surprising, in view of a lengthy recorded history of public reaction to the content of New Zealand primary and post-primary curriculum documents throughout the twentieth century. The great majority of readers will be familiar already with the new document's key proposals, so I shall not revisit them here. Instead I want to briefly examine four issues: the teaching of languages, the core values, the place of the Treaty of Waitangi in the publication, and the less prescriptive orientation of the new curriculum.

At the time of writing there has been considerable media speculation over the status and position of languages in the draft curriculum (see, e.g., Tan, 2006; Trevett, 2006a, 2006b). The document's authors are unapologetic in wanting a language—besides English and Maori—such as Chinese or Spanish, and one of the numerous languages from the Pacific Islands, recognised as a new, fundamental "learning area". Ostensibly this is in recognition of major changes in New Zealand communities and our society since the introduction in 1993 of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (NZCF) (Ministry of Education, 1993), to reflect in particular the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity within our nation. Some sceptics will be forgiven if they wish to remind the government (and Mr Maharey in particular) that something not altogether dissimilar was specified in the 1993 NZCF. Within that document the following statement can be found: "Students will be able to choose from a range of Pacific, Asian, and European languages, all of which are important to New Zealand's regional and international interests" (p.10). Readers of the new document may therefore wish to ask: What is new in the language domain? The answer could be a matter of degree of emphasis rather than the introduction of new languages as such.

Up until the much-publicised Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s the teaching of Chinese and Japanese languages in schools and elsewhere received enthusiastic support from the National government and from several other quarters. As we might have expected, these subjects tended to be studied more for their direct commercial and economic value than for their cultural merit. It should be remembered, however, that international languages are taught in schools presently, in Year 6 for instance, and that language teaching is supported with Ministry of Education funding and resources once school authorities demonstrate that their community has requested a language be taught. Nevertheless Steve Maharey, when launching the new document for public consultation, stated that the language(s) to be chosen in schools from September 2007—when the new curriculum takes effect—may well reflect the community composition of a particular school, be it Chinese, Indian, Pacific, or another readily identifiable group (Oliver, 2006a). This is an admirable sentiment, although I would like to believe that the reasons for advocating languages in addition to Maori and English now lie predominantly if not exclusively with their academic, cultural, and other attributes.

The draft national curriculum specifies a set of eight core values, described collectively as constituting "deeply held beliefs about what is important or desirable" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.10). It is pleasing to see "innovation, enquiry, and curiosity, by thinking creatively, critically, and reflectively" being openly promoted (p.10), and to learn that—contrary to the 1993 NZCF (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.21)—consideration is now being given to the reality that disagreements over conflicting values *will* arise in classrooms, and that these simply can not be and should not be avoided. I am disappointed however to

discover that the word “excellence” is used here and elsewhere throughout the 2006 document. Along with the mantra of “greater relevance” that appears all too frequently in numerous publications and commentaries on education, “excellence” deserves to be relegated to the terminological scrapheap as a matter of urgency. All that is needed, I believe, is the retention of the statement that accompanies the “value” of excellence: “by aiming high and by persevering in the face of difficulties” (p.10), albeit with some additional introductory wording. The eight values, we are told, will manifest themselves in ways that follow directly from school-community dialogue, although there is no explicit mention of what might happen if this local level conversation culminates in proposals that are sharply at odds—or not altogether compatible—with national, societal values articulated in the new document. Debate is likely to continue over values per se, the relationship between values, attitudes, and behaviour, and over whether or not values are more frequently “caught” than “taught”, as suggested in a recent *New Zealand Herald* editorial (“School values not just words”, 2006) on the revised curriculum.

Third, with reference to the Treaty of Waitangi some criticism is already apparent concerning the diminution of its status and principles in the document when compared with the 1993 NZCF (Oliver, 2006c). One of six “principles” in the new curriculum refers directly to “cultural heritage”, the study of which is expected to assist all students to become (more) aware of “New Zealand’s bicultural heritage and its multicultural society” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.9). Te reo Maori as such receives minimal column space; when reference is made to the language, its “unique [nature]” and contribution to “our nation’s self-knowledge and identity” (p.18) is emphasised appropriately. Such a description is hardly surprising, and its validity is likely to remain unchallenged. What is noteworthy, however, is the expectation that through classroom explorations of New Zealand’s unique society and its bicultural heritage, students will not only be able to ascertain their own positioning and that of other individuals but will also come to understand how this relates specifically to a *multicultural* New Zealand society (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.22; Oliver, 2006c).

There appears to be plenty of scope for intelligent and informed discussion about the Treaty and other important documents and/or events within at least one of the four “conceptual strands” to the Social Sciences, that of “continuity and change” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.22). It is envisaged that through this strand students will be able to “learn about past events, experiences, and actions and the changing ways in which these have been interpreted over time” (p.22). As an educational historian I applaud the sentiments contained in this statement. Furthermore, on my reading of it, the Treaty will not necessarily receive less attention or emphasis in the nation’s classrooms when the draft curriculum is fully implemented. Perhaps the curriculum writers were satisfied that the 1993 NZCF had achieved its objective in promoting—among other considerations—awareness and understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi and its significance nationally and abroad, with the result that it no longer needed to be mentioned as explicitly in the new document.

With reference to the general curriculum philosophy that underpins the new document, “a national direction for learning” is set out for each and every student. There is also an expectation that every school will “design and implement its own curriculum in ways that will engage and motivate its particular students” (p.26). To this end the document certainly encourages more school-based curriculum development than was conceivable under the 1993 NZCF. As Steve Maharey rightly predicts, its success will be determined ultimately by teachers’ “professional competence” (Oliver, 2006b), by the ready availability of subject advisers and appropriate professional development programmes for all teachers, satisfactory resource provision, and dedicated assessment tools (Trevett, 2006c). Nonetheless it seems reasonable to anticipate that not all staff will welcome the invitation to devise and implement curricula, either in the short or medium term. Some may request—or even demand—explicit guidelines from the Ministry of Education in the form of detailed syllabuses for not only each and every subject, whether compulsory or optional, but also for the six curriculum principles, the five key competencies, and the set of eight values outlined in the new document.

The success or otherwise of the draft curriculum may be determined ultimately by factors that transcend school subjects and their composition, however. Given the intimate relationship between a school curriculum and its assessment (see, e.g., Ministry of Education, 1993, pp.24–26), considerable care must be taken to ensure that examination requirements do not dominate teachers’ assessment

practices and workloads, particularly in New Zealand secondary schools. If such care is not exercised then the philosophy promoted in the draft document of substantial curricular freedom for students and teachers is unlikely to be translated into practice. Consequently, the latter will be unable to “develop new and innovative teaching approaches, and ...engage all students in rich and authentic learning experiences” (Maharey, 2006, p.1) to the extent and in the manner anticipated by the Minister of Education.

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