

Teachers and Curriculum



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TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

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THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM: MAY THE SPIRIT OF A DRAFT ALWAYS BE WITH US

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation (Ministry of Education, 2006) aims to first "set the direction for learning for all students while at school and will ensure that when they leave, they are equipped for lifelong learning and for living in a world where continual change is the norm" (p. 7), and second, to enable teachers to engage in what they consider to be best practice in teaching and as teachers.

This paper considers some issues with this draft concerning school-based curriculum development, enhancing opportunities for an emancipatory curriculum, the place of tikanga Māori and te ao Māori, specified competencies and competences, the meaning of managing self, effective pedagogy, values and what we value, and the notion of a curriculum which serves the whole person. Some cautionary notes are also sounded. Any curriculum must be necessarily tentative and flexible enough to accommodate change. The present document, as a draft, ought to be no exception.

PREAMBLE

The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation (2006) document invites discussion on constructing a curriculum that aims to "[help] our young people to reach their individual potential and develop the competencies they will need for further study, work, and lifelong learning" (p. 8). Designing a curriculum to do this is certainly challenging. At the same time, Fancy, as Secretary for Education makes the point that schools need teachers "to be motivated and enjoy their teaching" (p. 3). Defining the necessary conditions for enhancing teachers' motivation and enjoyment is also not as simple as first seems. Yet we know that these conditions may be enhanced when teachers believe they are capable of making a difference in the lives of their students, sense they are agentic in their teaching circumstances, know they have the capacity to operate with professional autonomy rather than within environments that fuel distrust through excessive external control, and believe that they are genuinely supported and resourced in their work. A curriculum that enables teachers to exercise genuine professional autonomy within a well-resourced and supportive environment is part of this equation.

The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation, therefore, is an important document not simply because "[it] will set the direction for learning for all students while at school and will ensure that when they leave, they are equipped for lifelong learning and for living in a world where continual change is the norm" (p. 7) but also for its potential to enable teachers to engage in what they consider to be best practice in teaching and as teachers.

The purpose of this paper is comment on some aspects of the draft curriculum as part of the debate concerning what is best for our students and their teachers. In particular, comment is made on several issues including school-based curriculum development, opportunities for emancipatory curriculum, tikanga Māori and te ao Māori, competencies and capabilities, managing self, effective pedagogy, values and what we value, and on the notion of a curriculum for the whole person. In a very real sense, then, curriculum development is both necessary and ongoing if our schools are to meet the ever-changing circumstances of today's world.

SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

From the outset, one positive feature of the document is the provision for each school to "design and implement its own curriculum in ways that will engage and motivate its particular students... [and] schools will have considerable freedom in deciding exactly how to do this" (p. 26). If we consider the best scenario, this represents an opportunity for schools, teachers and communities to exercise considerable autonomy in shaping the curriculum to meet their needs as they perceive them. In this regard the document is to be commended. The extent to which such autonomy will be able to be exercised by teachers, given the parameters of specified key competencies and assessment protocols monitored under a watchful eye of the Education Review Office, is yet to be seen.

A REAL CHANCE FOR EMANCIPATORY CURRICULUM?

Second, the less prescriptive nature of the draft curriculum brings with it the opportunity for teachers to develop a more emancipatory curriculum (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Friere, 1989; hooks, 1994; Schön, 1987) as they work in ways that honour the contributions of both teachers and students. Through the process of such curriculum evolution, both teachers and students may experience genuine transformation as new meanings, some of which are co-constructed, are developed (Schreiber & Banister, 2002). In a similar way, we might say this process is akin to what Bishop (2003) refers to as the 'negotiated curriculum' which enables not only increased opportunities for participation but also the potential to change power relationships in schools so that all students and teachers are enabled. Such a view may be seen as overly-optimistic by some educators; yet, a seemingly less prescriptive curriculum which releases more decision-making responsibility to teachers has the potential to create diverse interpretations and expressions of curriculum to meet the diversity of students and teaching circumstances.

TIKANGA MĀORI AND TE AO MĀORI

The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation document is described as the national curriculum for an English medium. A second document, yet to be produced, will be *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* for a Māori medium.

Aotearoa-New Zealand is a bicultural society with an increasing emphasis on bilingualism. It is disappointing, therefore, that the English medium document does not reflect this biculturalism or bilingualism. For instance, the learning areas are not named bilingually—a practice which, to date, has become commonplace. *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework: Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1993), for instance, refers bilingually to *The Essential Learning Areas: Nga tino wāhanga ako—The Arts Ngā toi; Technology Hangarau*, and so on. The new document omits such bilingual referencing.

Furthermore, while te reo Māori is acknowledged as “unique to New Zealand and is a source of our nation’s self-knowledge and identity” (p. 18), it is clustered (even within the same paragraph) with New Zealand Sign Language, Pacific languages, and classical languages. Indeed, the document makes the point that “He taonga ngā reo katoa. All languages are to be treasured” (p. 18). Yet, in presenting it the way it does, te reo Māori is valued like all other languages, but is not honoured as an official language of Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Similarly, only the Health and Physical Education Learning Area makes specific reference to te ao Māori and this is through the notion of hauora. No mention is made specifically acknowledging and accommodating te ao Māori in effective pedagogy, designing a school curriculum, or on planning outcomes, developing key competencies, or assessment.

It may be argued, perhaps, that these aspects will be accommodated within *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* for Māori medium. But the point is that as a nation we ought to be committed to the development of a bicultural and bilingual society. How we construct and present curriculum to students is instrumental in this.

COMPETENCIES AND CAPABILITIES

The document lists key competencies, also referred to as capabilities, required of all students. The term *competencies* is extrapolated to encompass not only skills but also knowledge, attitudes, and values. When students combine these successfully, they are described as capable.

There are several matters of concern here, however. First, the term ‘competencies’ relates to ‘competency’. Its roots in the educational literature are with the competency movement and its forerunner, task analysis. The emphasis of both these was on the specification of precise increments of learning or demonstrable behaviours. Such incrementalist approaches have largely been abandoned and replaced by more global descriptions. These are encapsulated in the term ‘competences’ which relates to ‘competence’. Nevertheless, on reading the draft document, it seems that the intent is to focus on competences rather than competencies.

Second, the document uses terms interchangeably: competencies with capabilities, and competent with capable. To be competent and to be capable are not necessarily one and the same thing. A student may be capable of reading difficult text, but not competent in doing so. Likewise, another student may be competent in solving algebraic problems, but also capable of solving more difficult ones.

ON MANAGING SELF

The document describes the first key competency as ‘managing self’. This is described as involving self-motivation, a ‘can-do’ attitude (what we may call self-efficacy), goal-setting and planning (components of self-regulated learning), and setting high personal standards (expectations). Associated with these, the document uses a set of personal attributes such as enterprising, resourceful, reliable, and resilient.

All these qualities are admirable. Yet, to describe them as ‘managing self’ perhaps undervalues their significance, and implies a need for deliberate self-control rather than valuing students’ sense of autonomy or agency as they increasingly expand their self-knowingness.

Managing self is also described as “students knowing who they are, where they come from, and where they fit in” (p. 11), though the link is expressed somewhat tenuously. Such self-knowing is important but it is more than simply knowledge. It is about valuing and appreciating oneself as a student increases their personal

connectedness with their own *beingness* (Gibbs, 2006). To describe this as ‘managing self’ also undervalues the significance of such personal journeys, for it is less about managing oneself and more about searching, revealing, knowing, appreciating and valuing.

EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

The document includes a section on effective pedagogy and in particular highlights the importance of encouraging reflective thought and action, helping learners make connections, providing multiple opportunities to learn, facilitating shared learning, enhancing the relevance of learning, and creating supportive learning environments. The discussion presents teachers as people who need to be knowledgeable, are able to draw on experience, and who are responsive. Yet, if teachers are “to be motivated and enjoy their teaching” (as Fancy says on page three), then such descriptions in the document are insufficient. Rather, good teaching draws from within teachers—from their innermost being and from who they are as people (Palmer, 1999). Pedagogy which fails to account for this serves to undervalue the importance of the personness of teachers (Gibbs, 2006). A curriculum which addresses the wholeness of people, therefore, needs to account for not only the uniqueness and individuality of students but also that of teachers, for they are instrumental in the lives of students and their learning.

VALUES, AND WHAT WE VALUE

Values are cited as being a key element in the new draft curriculum. These refer specifically to certain specified values “that New Zealanders expect schools to model and foster” (p. 7). While values ought to be central in any curriculum that prepares students for life, the document presents them in a confused way.

First, the document defines values as “deeply held beliefs about what is important or desirable... [and these] are expressed in the ways in which people think and act” (p. 10). This definition is somewhat simplistic and inadequate. Put simply, people may act in ways that are not consistent with the values which they hold, and this may include even deeply held values. Halstead and Taylor (2000) have suggested that values are “the principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour, the standards by which particular actions are judged as good or desirable” (p. 169). Hill (2004) defines values as “the ideals that give significance to our lives, that are reflected through the priorities individuals and societies attach to certain beliefs, experiences and objects, in deciding how

they should live and what they shall treasure" (p. 4). He argues that values are concerned with ideals: they are associated with a deep commitment, and are not just known but are also treasured. As Hill points out, this definition shifts the attention from a cognitive responsiveness to one which considers the whole person (incorporating not just the cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions, but also the spiritual) and his or her dispositional nature. It is this latter interpretation, I would suggest, which more accurately portrays the subtlety of values. The document, however, appears to rest more on the former view.

Second, there is an assumption in the document that by engaging with values (through expressing them, exploring, critically analysing, discussing), students will become committed to those values. Embedded in this argument is a sense of causal association and habit formation. But as Hill points out, "commitment to a value is not merely a socially-conditioned habit" (p. 5). Yet, the document tends to treat values as propositions of thought which, if engaged with in different ways, somehow become learned values to which students are committed and which become evidenced in behaviour. While such an outcome is desirable and the argument is appealing, albeit superficially, nevertheless it is somewhat questionable as to whether "when the school community has developed strongly held and clearly articulated values, those values are likely to be expressed in everyday actions and interactions within the school" (p. 10). In short, there is a marked difference between rhetoric and reality.

Third, the document confuses individuals' values and institutions' values. In describing the key elements of the new curriculum, the document refers to those values pertaining to what schools "model and foster" (p. 7). The emphasis here, while not exclusive, is predominantly on the values of institutions. Put simply, the document fails to disentangle institutional, community, and personal values. Furthermore, the document fails to provide scope for coping with the value pluralisms of society that reside at the institutional, community, and personal levels.

Fourth, there is equivocation in the document between values *per se* and what people value. The discussion describes values in the curriculum as those that enable New Zealand communities to live cooperatively and democratically, and then proceeds to outline what New Zealand students ought to value. To value (in the sense of appreciate) something does not mean that people hold that which is valued as values or aspirational standards. Put simply, to value a sunny day does not mean

that we therefore hold this as a value. Furthermore, and more specifically, consider 'excellence' which is listed as one value that students will learn to value (p. 10), as well as being a *principle* underpinning the curriculum (p. 9). To value excellence is not the same as holding excellence as a value; similarly, to value integrity does not mean that one necessarily holds integrity as a value.

Fifth, when one considers defining common values it is interesting to note the values identified for Australian schooling match at least in general intent those for New Zealand schools (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). The interesting variations, however, are that the Australian common values include freedom (that is, "to enjoy all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and to stand up for the rights of others"), and care and compassion (to "care for self and others"). In contrast, the New Zealand list includes a somewhat ill-defined value termed "innovation, enquiry, and curiosity, by thinking creatively, critically, and reflectively" (p. 10).

Finally, the document suggests that students will learn about moral, social, cultural, aesthetic, and economic values—all values that are generally valued by the State. Furthermore no mention is made of spiritual values, or indeed, of virtues. Why this is so is not immediately evident.

CURRICULUM FOR THE WHOLE PERSON

All curricula are socially constructed and informed by the beliefs of those who are the architects. Underpinning any curricula, therefore, are a set of beliefs and assumptions, especially about students, teachers, and education. Earlier documentation associated with the curriculum frequently acknowledged the importance of seeing every student as a whole person. Indeed this includes the spiritual dimension, as *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000) points out:

The arts develop the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience. They contribute to our intellectual ability and to our social, cultural, and *spiritual* [italics added] understandings. They are an essential element of daily living and of lifelong learning (p. 9).

This reference to the spiritual dimension is also present in other New Zealand curricula, and, internationally. In Australia, for instance, *The national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century* (Department of Education, Science & Training, 1999) document says that "schooling provides a foundation for young Australians' intellectual, physical, social, moral, *spiritual* [italics added] and aesthetic development". This was reinforced by the *Values Education Study* (Curriculum Corporation, 2003) which highlighted the importance of "values-based education to enrich students' holistic development" (p. 17). The New Zealand draft curriculum, however, is devoid of reference to the spiritual dimension. Indeed, the only reference to the spiritual dimension, once again, is in the Health and Physical Education footnote which describes "Taha wairua [as relating] to spiritual well-being" (p. 16).

It is for this reason that I endorse Hill's (2004) description of values referred to earlier in this paper as the notion of what will be treasured, for it brings with it an appreciation of the affective and even spiritual dimension that ought to permeate any education that has heart. When curricula serve the whole person, then students are better positioned to seek authenticity in their learning and their lives as they increase their sense of relational connectedness (Gibbs, 2006).

In advancing this need for more explicit acknowledgement of the whole person and in particular the spiritual dimension, I am arguing that any curriculum cannot advocate a position of neutralism. Nevertheless, such a view does not negate the necessary impartiality expected as this relates to religion. But, in turn, it restores a sense of education serving the needs of the whole person—both student and teacher.

SOME CAUTIONARY NOTES

Let me now make three cautionary notes. First, this paper does not deal with assessment—that is another matter and one which needs full debate. Indeed my comments at this time rest on the curriculum, for as Gardner (1991) has said:

One can have the best assessment imaginable, but unless the accompanying curriculum is of quality, the assessment has no use... Unless teachers accept the curriculum, however, and not only believe in it but embody its precepts in their teaching, the best curriculum and ways of assessing it are of little value. (p. 254)

Second, the implementation of any new curriculum is more complex than it first seems. Clearly the process requires investment, as well as appreciation and acknowledgement of the lives of teachers as they confront their work each day. Teachers are remarkably resilient and innovative when their circumstances value these qualities.

When faced with a novel curriculum which he [sic] only vaguely understands, the average teacher exhibits a remarkable capacity for doing the same old things under a new name. (Beeby, 1979, p. 136)

Third, for a curriculum to be worthwhile for students it needs to be considered meaningful. How students regard the curriculum—all that happens in their education life—is influenced by their perceptions.

A boy who had just left school was asked by his former headmaster what he thought of the new buildings. "It could all be marble, sir," he replied, "but it would still be a bloody school" (Central Advisory Council for Education—England, 1963. p. 241)

CONCLUSION

In his foreword to the document, Fancy rightly suggests that teachers, principals, advisers, academics, policy makers, boards of trustees, communities, parents, students and others will "continue to share in the on going evolution of the curriculum" (p. 3). Any curriculum needs to be responsive to a constantly changing world where new knowledge, insights, understandings, and appreciations can enlighten our visioning about education. In this sense, my hope is that this curriculum will forever be draft, and never final.

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