
EDITORIAL COMMENT

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Curriculum: Theory, Issues and Practice

What should count as knowledge? How do we define curriculum? Who should control the selection and distribution of knowledge? How is the curriculum best organised? What influences from society lead to curriculum change? Which theories are useful in illuminating curriculum? How and why has curriculum changed in New Zealand? How political is curriculum?

The writers in this special student edition were all enrolled in an ACE Masters module 'Curriculum: Theory, Issues and Practice' in either 1998 or 1999. The writers all work in education, they are currently either teachers, senior managers, advisers or principals.

Curriculum change in New Zealand education has impacted on each of these writer's working lives. Some began their teaching career in the 1970s when the curriculum was not explicitly defined. Considered 'professionals', teachers then had significant freedom in deciding on the knowledge to be learned within classrooms. Today this freedom is considerably more restricted, curriculum is more prescribed. Beginning teachers graduating from today's tertiary institutions leave armed with a set of documents which comprise the National Curriculum Framework. These documents are all structured in a similar way. Eight arbitrary levels have been inserted into the thirteen years of schooling. Within each particular level, achievement objectives are prescribed. Examples are provided of ways to achieve the objectives, and there is considerable focus on the assessment of these objectives.

There is nothing very innovative in the way the New Zealand documents structure knowledge. Over fifty years ago, Tyler (1949) produced a plan for curriculum development using an objectives model. Tyler's model has four steps, each based on a particular question: What educational goals should the school seek to attain? How can learning experiences be selected which are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives? How can learning experiences be organised for effective instruction? How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated? Kliebard (1970:260) simplifies Tyler's model to: 'stating objectives, selecting "experiences", organising "experiences" and evaluating'. Kliebard expresses concerns about Tyler's model. In particular Kliebard has reservations regarding the source of the objectives. Why are certain objectives chosen over others? Who makes the decision regarding choice of objectives? Is an objectives model the best way of organising knowledge? Is a particular lesson or programme a failure if the stated objectives are not met? Marsh (1992) also indicates concerns regarding an objectives model. One of his reservations centres on the fact that only intended instructional objectives are evaluated; unintended learning is ignored.

Why was Tyler's model used as a template for curriculum development in New Zealand? Stenhouse (1973:83), describes the large scale use of objectives 'laid down from the centre' (central government in New Zealand's case) as a kind of 'teacher proofing'. In other words, the more prescribed the curriculum, the more control there

is over what is actually learned in individual classrooms: '(T)he curriculum is to tend in the same direction whatever the knowledge and talents of the individual teacher and indeed of the individual student' (Stenhouse 1973:83). Undoubtedly there was political motivation behind the decision to adopt an objectives model. Teachers as professionals need to understand that political motivation, as well as the political context.

What was the source of the objectives in the New Zealand curriculum? As part of the 'Curriculum: Theory, Issues and Practice' module, students met with a selection of writers of the Curriculum statements. The writers shared with the students the pro forma to which they were expected to conform. They also shared some of the tensions they as individuals felt during the development processes. Stresses emerged, in many cases, because of the limited consultation permitted by the Ministry of Education during the development of the objectives. Teachers, BOTs and parents, generally, were not consulted. Selected groups were invited to comment on the 'draft' objectives, which were then published in a Draft statement. Few changes were made between the Draft statements and the final documents. What ultimately emerged was a series of 'top-down' objectives-based documents which will attempt to prescribe the direction of education for perhaps the next decade.

Does this matter? Yes, it does matter. Do we want a 'cloned' system of education? Are teachers prepared to be, and should they be, mere executors of what other people have decided they should teach? Are teachers in danger of becoming dependent on 'objectives recipes', set textbooks, and curriculum packages? Will teachers become technocrats rather than reasonably autonomous professionals? We need to address these questions because, with teacher workload increasing, it is becoming far more difficult for teachers to take the time to be creative and reflective in their practice.

Despite these pressures, many teachers are taking the opportunity for new forms of professional development. These new forms are often at the post-graduate level, and they generally have a strong theoretical base. While much system provided professional development focuses on how to 'deliver' curriculum, theory based courses encourage critical reflection on curriculum and related practice. Theory based courses, with considerable emphasis on reflection, are crucial if teachers wish to retain any form of professional autonomy over their work. Freire (1993), a very strong advocate of the permanent professional development of teachers, maintained '(T)he educator is the subject of his or her practice; it is up to the educator to create and recreate this practice' (Freire 1993:74). Professional Development is a means to the creation of a truly professional practice.

The writers were undertaking a new form of professional development. These papers in this edition were selected from the assignments of students enrolled in the 'Curriculum: Theory, Issues and Practice' module. My intention in developing the module was that the content would be generic. Considerable leeway was therefore given to students regarding the direction of their studies. What bound the module was an eclectic theoretical base, with a focus mainly on critical theory. The 'issues' covered depended on the then contemporary contexts, and the 'practice' depended on the interests and expertise of the professionals who enrolled in the module. It was a privilege to work alongside these writers and others enrolled in the module. While each person brought considerable professional and practical experience to the module, most brought limited experience in the field of academic study and pursuits.

My suggestion is that, as a consequence, the work of these writers is refreshingly different. The writing herein combines new knowledge and understandings with the passions of those newly able to theorise their day-to-day working lives.

The papers are arranged to take the reader from the macro through to the micro context. Roger Shearer and George Payne indulged their passions for politics, and their work sets the scene for the latter papers. Shearer traces curriculum change from the Currie Report (1962), through to the Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education 1993). He questions why the 1993 document, generally, was not seen as problematic. Payne examines the political context and uses this, combined with philosophy of education, to contextualise a critique of the Mathematics Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1992).

The introduction of Technology into the New Zealand Curriculum Framework is arguably the aspect of the curriculum within which teachers have faced the most challenges. Three writers chose to look at particular issues surrounding Information and Communication Technology. Deborah Fisher, a high school teacher of history, puts forward a case for using computer software, CD Roms and the Internet to enhance the teaching and learning of history. Sandie Gusscott explores the 1999 status of the subjects within the Technology Curriculum. Gusscott looks at the history of technical subjects, and gives some suggestions regarding the future status of Technology. Liz Rosie investigates the opportunities for girls in computer literacy and examines reasons for inequalities which have emerged. Rosie examines recent literature regarding gender and technology and contends that policy makers and teachers have a significant role to play in ensuring that girls are treated fairly regarding computer access and use.

Gender, and in particular issues for girls, is a theme continued by Anne Bradstreet and Clare Hocking. Bradstreet challenges the recent media and ERO focus on the needs of boys, and contends that girls remain disadvantaged in schools. Hocking examines gender role stereotyping in literature and maintains that this has led to the undervaluing of women and girls. Like other writers in this issue, Hocking sees teachers as having the power to make a difference. Hocking contends that teachers have the potential to break through the 'illusion of inclusiveness' to reveal and expose the structures which support exclusion.

Finally, Barbara Strong discusses some of the reasons why corporate involvement in curriculum has increased. She argues that business becomes involved in education for primarily one reason; to increase business profits. Strong contends that teachers need to critically examine all curriculum content. In particular, Strong asserts that teachers need to question the motives of all providers of 'free' curriculum resources.

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Contributors

Anne Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet is the newly appointed Principal of Kauri Park Primary School in Birkdale on the North Shore. Anne has held both AP and DP positions and has taught for over 20 years at all levels of primary schools. Anne has been doing Ad Qual papers for the past 10 years, completing her Advanced Diploma, Diploma of Education Management and her Postgraduate Diploma of Education.

Deborah Fisher

Deborah has been a teacher of History and Social Studies for the past 17 years. She began her teaching career in England, but has spent most of it teaching in New Zealand, with her most recent appointment at Lynfield College. Her main teaching interest is in using her subject to encourage the development of well-rounded, educated, thinking individuals.

Sandie Guscott

Sandie Guscott is Contracts Manager at the Auckland College of Education. Sandie is interested in curriculum change and how teachers and schools cope with implementing these changes. She has taken a leading role in providing professional development in the Auckland and Northland area for the curriculums of Science, Technology and Health and Physical Education. Sandie has been involved in technology education since the writing of the curriculum in 1995.

Clare Hocking

Clare is Principal at Lincoln Heights School in West Auckland. She has been involved in education for over 25 years, has taught all levels of the primary school and held AP and DP positions in both South and North Island schools. Clare has a strong interest in the Quality Schools Philosophy (Glasser) and is currently Training Officer for the William Glasser Institute in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

George Payne

George Payne is a senior manager in an Area School of approximately 500 pupils. He teaches a year six class and has administrative responsibility for eight staff and 180 pupils from year 0 to year 6. He has an Advanced Diploma in Teaching and the Diploma of Education Management. Currently George is working towards completing his Master of Education degree with the Auckland College of Education.

Liz Rosie

Liz Rosie teaches year one and two children at Fairburn School in Otahuhu. She is studying for an MEd for the personal interest and intellectual challenge it brings, and has found it very rewarding. She is firmly committed to the concept that “girls can do anything,” and this has influenced her choice of topics.

Roger Shearer

Roger Shearer is the principal of Birkdale Primary School, a multicultural school on Auckland's North Shore. His academic interest is in the politics behind the curriculum and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework.

Barbara Strong

Barbara Strong is currently senior teacher with responsibility for junior classes at a South Auckland school. Her professional development interests are in curriculum and enhancing practice through this. She has gained her higher and advanced diplomas of teaching through A.C.E. and is currently working on her Master's.

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