

Can You Write a School Curriculum?

Focus: A question and answer session for New Zealand principals on how the new draft curriculum might be implemented.

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Acknowledgments

The writer is indebted to the Ministry of Education, NZEI, The Principals' Federation and the Matakana School Board of Trustees for the opportunity to analyse curriculum development and implementation in New Zealand and Canada. What began as an exercise aimed at writing a simplified curriculum for parents developed into a return to basics. How is curriculum derived? Who controls curriculum? What is the role of the school in developing curriculum? Some questions have been answered for this principal.

One cannot write a curriculum handbook for parents until a school ethos about curriculum has been developed. The knowledge content of the curriculum is the easy part.

Executive Summary

The debate about developing school curriculum is sometimes obscured by confusing terminology. School principals need to be aware of the political climate around curriculum development, and be clear about the degree of local input that is possible.

Purpose

This research exercise has been aimed at clarifying the process of curriculum change that has begun in New Zealand schools as a result of the release of the Draft New Zealand Curriculum document. The writer visited Edmonton, Alberta in Canada, visiting schools and the Alberta Department of Education, as guest of the Alberta Teachers' association. The focus for research here was to establish how Alberta Education Authorities determined how their Curriculum would be formulated.

Are you preparing to "*lead curriculum change*" (1) in your school? What follows are some reflections on the value of reviewing school curricula and some of the practical implications that underpin that process.

Why are we changing our National curriculum? .

The revision of national curricula is a response to political pressure. A perception that New Zealand did not have a world class education system led to a thorough review of the NZ curriculum in 2002. Although a report claimed that New Zealand's system was "world class" for a large group of students it conceded that "*wide disparities of outcomes for groups of students persist.*" Curriculum Stocktake 2002 (2)

New Zealand is part of the **OECD** (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), a grouping of some 30 developed countries who work together and provide fellow members with comparative statistical data. For example New Zealand is now ranked 12th in the OECD for educational attainment with 76% of those 25 – 64 having some secondary or tertiary qualification, but this is some distance from the Czech Republic who have 88% success rate.

Remodelling education systems has become increasingly expedient as nations respond to global change and attempt to refine curriculum so as to best serve national interests. Politicians particularly, are looking to education to provide the nation with a workforce able to establish a competitive advantage essential for economic growth and prosperity.

This is not radical new thinking. These concerns have been expressed regularly throughout history. Fourteen years ago a USA Education Commission reported the same anxieties.

“Concerns that the education system cannot adequately prepare students for life and work in the 21st Century have prompted people across the country to explore new ways of designing education” 1993 Education Commission of the States. (1995, January). *“Outcome-based” education: An overview*

Just what new processes should be adopted to modify curricula in a positive way is an educational battleground. Critics of the latest curriculum draft in New Zealand such as those in ***The Education Forum*** (3) argue that the latest shift is *“intellectually flawed and obsolete”* (4).

What is the curriculum?

Principals and teachers in New Zealand schools have been part of the development of a new national curriculum since 1992. The curriculum is a set of nationally standardised documents that prescribes the kind of content and objectives reckoned to be appropriate for New Zealand schools. Described very simply,

“The New Zealand curriculum is the formal knowledge structure that New Zealand teachers start from and integrate into school organisation structures” Carr, McGee, Jones, McKinley, Bell, Barr, Simpson 2006

The development of mandated curricula has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, and selected curriculum writing teams drawn from a variety of educators and subject specialists. The Ministry’s website offers this explanation:

“New National Curriculum Statements have been progressively replacing old syllabuses since 1992. They have been published initially in draft form for consultation and trialling, then published in final form, and finally gazetted for mandatory implementation in years 1–10.” (6)

A great deal of the international debate about the definition of curriculum is focused on the distinction between curriculum and teaching pedagogy. Adams, Sands, and Stout (1995) maintain that curriculum is concerned with the “what” and teaching is concerned with the “how to.” This distinction is not defined specifically in the new curriculum document.

Who writes the real curriculum?

Let’s be clear from the outset that schools cannot really write their own curriculum. The knowledge content and the sequential development of concepts within curricula are developed by curriculum experts in each particular field, according to processes approved by the Ministry of Education; that is entirely predictable. Otherwise schools would be faced with an impossible task and there would be little possibility of any kind of national curriculum, although some researchers are not sure that that would be a bad thing!

The writer visited Alberta, Canada, researching this particular aspect of curriculum design. Despite what is said about the notion that all stakeholders (including students and parents) get a say in the detail of curriculum, the reality is that in order to achieve coherence and sensible design, curriculum development (i.e. the knowledge content) is the domain of professional designers and lead teachers in the field. Even then, curriculum developers are also constrained by politicians. As Lester Flockton says in a review of the draft NZ curriculum submissions *“There were two significant features that underpinned the development of the draft: cabinet authorisation and professional collaboration. Cabinet authorisation set the scope, and by implication certain boundaries, around the extent to which the Ministry of Education could reconstruct the national curriculum (see fig. 1). It did not allow carte blanche.”* (7)

What does “design your own curriculum” mean?

Schools cannot write a new knowledge curriculum. What we are permitted to do within our schools is to generate a teaching style or pedagogy that develops “key competencies” in students. We must also produce a planned approach to the delivery of the curriculum’s achievement objectives, that establishes enthusiasm for learning and educational success among teachers, students and the whole local community. That’s about it!

However, if schools step outside the square regarding the knowledge content of curriculum, they set themselves up against an imposing array of forces that will challenge and question all that they do. Our national testing programmes from Six year nets to PAT and AsTTle and on to NCEA set the parameters for achievement in New Zealand Schools.

If schools set and use an alternative knowledge curriculum they are unlikely to be permitted to step away from National testing to adopt some

new measure of performance. The Education Review office will also want to comment on such a process. Finally, the local community would have to give almost total support for a distinctive local knowledge curriculum, were it to have any chance of success.

So despite the enticing language of the Ministry brochures, you will not be re-writing national curriculum content unless you are leading a crusade.

There is one exception to this rule. A new scenario is emerging in New Zealand. An increasing number of secondary schools are adopting the interesting strategy of teaching two curriculums. One is based around the NCEA assessment system, the other prepares students for an International Baccalaureate qualification. How long this will continue may depend on how much credibility the State NCEA qualification develops.

What then, is School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) all about?

It's pretty hard to figure out why the Ministry of Education is now promoting investigation of a process that ended internationally, about a decade ago. *The Education Gazette* Volume 86 Number 16 17 September 2007 calls for people "to register their interest in joining an **expert focus group** to construct a conceptual framework for developing school based curriculum" (8)

Even Rachel Bolstad, a curriculum evaluator at NZCER seems puzzled by the new interest in SBCD. She has recently written an article entitled: *School-based curriculum development: Is it coming back into fashion?* Bolstad 2005

Are we talking about the same thing? Is the Ministry's offer really about local control about what students learn, or about *adapting* (my emphasis) the mandated curriculum for school use?

It's not long since devolution to self managing schools was the catch phrase but the reality is that in the last decade there has been a consistent drive for central control. School based curriculum development seems strangely at odds with the current focus on a seamless education system. Is this SBCD initiative intent on promoting the idea that *there is choice* on curriculum content? Is it an attempt to provide choice for schools with specific curriculum issues related to religious views or cultural style?

In an interesting debate on the Principal's website "*Leadspace*" principal Gayleen Mackereth points out some risks associated with a local development of curriculum:

"parents living in an area where the school designs a curriculum reflecting the majority ethnic mix which does not accord with their values, will perhaps find it necessary to move house to an area where schools reflect their own European or Polynesian values, which in turn could lead to increasing sectarianism. While it looks as if we are being

inclusive, we have to ask if the innocuous Eduspeak of the Draft Curriculum about schools designing their own curriculum to reflect the local community's beliefs and values may not be the instrument of the most radical social change in NZ's recent history." Mackereth 2006 (10)

Sadly, the history of SBCD internationally, is of bright promise that regularly ends in despair. At the stroke of a pen, politicians consign the most carefully prepared SBCD to history. There are few current examples of successful SBCD available anywhere in the world.

School based curriculum development is just "shadow boxing" unless there is a new interpretation of what SBCD means...and that is quite possible.

Perhaps what the Ministry of Education in New Zealand is talking about is this definition from Hong Kong

"School-based curriculum is the general policy ordained by the Curriculum Development Council for schools' consideration in the design of a quality curriculum conducive to effective pupil learning. Schools are encouraged to adapt the Central Curriculum to suit their unique contexts. When designing the school-based curriculum, schools are advised to observe closely the directions and requirements stipulated by the Curriculum Development Council in the official curriculum documents. (12)

Does that sound more likely? You have free choice as long as you observe all directions and stipulations!

The increasing use of the term "School Based Curriculum Development" suggests that both New Zealand Ministry of Education personnel and some academics recognise this term to mean school based curriculum delivery development.

Curriculum Delivery

What options are possible here?

The big change in the National Curriculum draft is the focus on process.

Some observers such as Catherine Woulf at the *Sunday Star-times* (13) suggest that the new focus is an "outcome approach"

For those new to the jargon, outcomes based education (OBE) has polarised opinion among educators for the last two decades. Some of the views are extreme!

Richard G. Berlach of the University of Notre Dame Australia, shocked Australians in Western Australia by describing outcomes based education as "the death of knowledge".

Outcomes based systems have been in place in Western Australia for more than a decade and are currently being held responsible, by some, for major problems in schools in Western Australia

An article in *The West Australian* newspaper offers the following comment” Education 'heads for meltdown' (page 3) by Bethany Hiatt

”Academics urge State Government to stop patching up flawed, unworkable OBE and look at new models.

The furore surrounding outcomes-based education has been reignited, with highly-respected academics warning that education in WA is headed towards meltdown and the teacher shortage is likely to worsen if the State Government ploughs ahead with the controversial system.” (14)

Closely aligned with “outcomes based education” is “standards based assessment”. In fact it is difficult to discern significant differences, except that New Zealand’s Ministry of Education seem to prefer the term.

Their definition is as follows:

A standard-based assessment assesses learner achievement in relation to set standards. The NCEA uses standards to show what students know and can do. Standards are written statements that describe exactly what a student has to know and be able to do in order to be awarded a unit or achievement standard and therefore gain credits towards the NCEA (or other qualification). A student's achievement is benchmarked or compared to an expected level, rather than to other students' achievements (norm-based assessment). (15) Assessment Glossary MOE

Of course the key question is always, “Who sets the benchmarks?”

What impact does assessment have on curriculum?

It’s not possible to look at curriculum change without reference to assessment. As said at the outset, failure to achieve, is the political driver of curriculum change. In recent years New Zealand has moved from a situation where assessment was based on comparisons within cohorts to standards based education.

The reasons for this were that: “Curricula was increasingly being specified in outcomes, and assessed and reported against such outcomes. There was the realisation by many countries that the ranking (cohort-referenced) mark-based approach used in the past did not provide enough information about student strengths, and also hid evidence of achievement in areas of interest where standards-based assessment could supply relevant information. (15) D.Goh 2005

Perhaps a more telling reason was that New Zealand was falling behind the rest of the OECD countries in testing conducted by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). As stated previously, curriculum is very much driven by assessment. John Morris, Principal of Auckland Grammar School commented recently that “the assessment dog is

wagging the syllabus tail to a far greater extent than under previous qualifications". (16)

It seems that whoever writes the summative tests, controls the curriculum. In that sense, writers and analysts of 6 Year nets, AsTTle, PAT tests, NEMP, NCEA and PISA have a very powerful impact on what schools teach because the credibility of the school seems to be dependant on "standardised" test outcomes. This is particularly evident at upper secondary school level but also at tertiary level. Governments too are reacting to International analysis of performance by initiating radical reforms that may not be justified. They too, are teaching to the test!
(17)

So what does a school really need to do ?

There is little doubt that one of the key objectives associated with the implementation of the new draft Curriculum is to ensure that New Zealand principals and schools take ownership of the new document. Consequently, there is a steady flow of new documentation and initiatives associated with finding ways to encourage and facilitate the process. For example:

"Help at hand for curriculum change

A new series of resource guides will help school leaders begin preparing for the implementation of the revised New Zealand curriculum in English.

Developed by the Ministry of Education with the input of principals, advisors, sector representatives, curriculum and leadership specialists, the guides are intended to help principals start thinking now about how they will implement the revised curriculum, even though it is still in draft form for the next few months.

Principals can expect to receive an overview guide in this term's edition of Leading the New Zealand Way, outlining the content of the first five guides. The overview will also provide suggestions for ways that principals could start thinking about implementation, and sets out the key themes of the new draft statement." Ministry of Education (18)

Principals work in a profession that aims to provide the best possible educational opportunities for children. One aspect of the new curriculum changes that all will be able to identify with are the " key competencies " which were revised from the "essential skills" in the previous curriculum document.

Key Competencies are “the things all people need to know and be able to do in order to live meaningfully in, and contribute to, a well functioning society. Hipkins 2006 (20)

There is a reasonably vigorous debate going on to see whether schools should find ways to assess the key competencies.

Should we make the development of key competencies the focus for “curriculum change”?

The development of key competencies in a school teaching style is the primary way that schools can redesign curriculum.

As they analyse the particular aspirations of their school, community, teachers and Boards of Trustees may find a focus that generates that enthusiasm and excitement that will lead to an approach to curriculum delivery that is distinctive.

Because the profession is committed to encourage and develop effective teaching and learning for all NZ students it is unlikely that principals will reject the challenge of implementing the new draft curriculum...

Fortunately, there is good research evidence that the “key competencies” can be developed into effective pedagogy that will allow schools to promote teaching that will stimulate learning. In a report for the Ministry of Education called *The Effects of Curricula and Assessment on Pedagogical Approaches and on Educational Outcomes* M. Carr, C. McGee, A. Jones, E. McKinley, B. Bell, H. Barr, T. Simpson explain that:

“Evidence is available that shows that when critical thinking skills and content are included in a school curriculum student performance can be raised.” And that

“In summary, teachers who see learners as thinkers, and capable of achieving more, enable children to view themselves as able to learn.”
(21)

It is certain that principals do not need to be told that.

CONCLUSION

The debate about developing school curriculum is sometimes obscured by confusing terminology. School principals need to be aware of the political climate around curriculum development, and be clear about the degree of local input that is possible. One would hope that national education leaders will continue to help us define this position. Lester Flockton probably sums up the situation well when he says”

“As one of the main goals of the revision of the national curriculum is to strengthen school ownership of curriculum, it is fundamentally important that the document itself makes very

clear the scope available for localisation. To leave this to the National Education Guidelines is to undermine the status of the national curriculum in providing such direction, and to risk confusion and irregularities in the interpretation of requirements by schools and government agencies. This sort of confusion, which has prevailed over the past decade, should be remedied.”
(22)

The school's curriculum is at the heart of the teaching and learning process in every school. How the curriculum is interpreted and developed will depend on the school's own vision and how that vision is shared between children, teachers and all members of the school community.

If the new draft curriculum produces consistent guidelines for schools in how to produce distinctive programmes that provide quality educational opportunities for children, then New Zealand education will prosper.

Conclusions

New Zealand School Principals face an important task in interpreting the new draft curriculum for their staff and their communities. The key difference a principal can make is in developing a combined school ownership of the particular vision that is appropriate for that community. The principal should also be aware of the forces that mould both the knowledge content of curriculum and the approaches to curriculum delivery that produce worthwhile educational outcomes.

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