

Principal Sabbatical Inquiry 2010

Key Competencies: Implementation and Issues

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

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I am very grateful to the schools, their principals and staff, who shared their experiences and practice with me. I appreciated the time that Rose Hipkins of NZCER made available in her busy schedule.

STATUS OF THIS REPORT:

This report is not intended to be an academic report. It simply records reflections upon the readings, observations and discussions I undertook during the sabbatical and in the period immediately after my return to school.

PURPOSE:

2010 brought the implementation of the revised New Zealand Curriculum after the draft and trialling and consultation. I was interested to see how other schools had interpreted and implemented the Key Competencies with a particular interest on how schools are dealing with the challenge of reporting achievement and progress in the Key Competencies

BACKGROUND

In 2007 I completed the research project requirement of my Diploma of Educational Management with a project entitled, ***Unlocking the Managing Self Key Competency to develop resiliency in a primary school.***

This involved Action Research with a group of Year 6 children, their parents and teachers from Papanui Primary School. It was through interviews of the children and their self assessments that I observed, over time, growth in their ability to reflect upon their learning. It also showed that through reflection and authentic learning experiences that they were able to define resiliency and identify important resiliency builders.

This experience along with Papanui School's ongoing development of its school based curriculum, which is organised around the key competencies, led me to the topic of key competencies and assessment .

METHODOLOGY:

My learning activities included

- A review of relevant literature on - Key Competencies and Learning Stories.

- Visits to schools that are considered innovative and , or early adopters in the area of my topic, to interview principals and teachers, and to observe practice and processes.
- Interviews – meetings with the educational leaders in this area, Dr Rose Hipkins (Key Competencies) and Margaret Carr (Learning Stories).

FINDINGS

My initial readings looked at the development of the Key Competencies and their adaption to the New Zealand as a part of the Curriculum Stocktake.

Key Competencies and the International Context

“Sustainable development and social cohesion depend critically on the competencies of all of our population – with competencies understood to cover knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.”

(OECD Education Ministers DeSeCo Executive Summary, p 4)

Change is a constant for everyone in the 21st century. These changes bring both individual challenges and collective challenges balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability, and prosperity with social equity.

To help meet these challenges the OECD completed an extensive international study, Defining and Selecting Key Competencies (DeSeCo), to identify the key competencies needed by everyone for a good life and a well functioning society. They determined that key competencies must:

- Contribute to valued outcomes for societies and individuals
- Help individuals meet important demands in a wide variety of contexts; and
- Be important not just for specialists but for all individuals.

Key competencies are defined in the DeSeCo Summary of the final report (2003) as

- The ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context
- The mobilization of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

The key competencies that were produced as a result were;

- Functioning in socially heterogeneous groups;
- Acting autonomously; and
- Using tools interactively.

To these “thinking” was added as a “cross-cutting” key competency. This means that it is included as an aspect of all of the other three competencies.

Key Competencies and the New Zealand Context

In New Zealand the Ministry of Education initiated the Curriculum Stocktake Report (Ministry of Education, 2003). From this emerged The New Zealand Draft Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006). It identified changes that schooling system faces.

These include changes in New Zealand society, changes in the economy, and the new opportunities opened up by information and communications technology (ICT), including the Internet. Increasingly, New Zealand is part of the global community and influenced by international events and trends. (p3)

The changes in New Zealand society include the increasing diversity in New Zealand society. This diversity includes many characteristics and these are listed in Alton-Lee (2003) as including;

Ethnicity, socio-economic background, home language, gender, special needs, disability, and giftedness.

Brewerton (2004) and Hipkins (2005) take up the challenge of interpreting key competencies and aligning the essential skills from the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1997). Their review and analysis of the OECD's DeSeCo confirmed the need for New Zealand to embrace key competencies.

...with a new emphasis on articulating and teaching key competencies as an intrinsic part of all learning outcomes. (Brewerton, 2004:34)

And;

My reading of future-focused literature that explores how schools need to change to meet the needs of students in this century, not the previous one, suggests that key competencies could be a useful part of whatever overall responses we make. (Hipkins, 2005:38)

The New Zealand Curriculum mandates five Key Competencies . They are;

- Relating to others
- Managing self
- Participating and contributing
- Thinking
- Using language, symbols and texts

Our school, along with many others utilized the curriculum training days provided by the Ministry of Education to explore The New Zealand Curriculum Draft (2006). One of the critical decisions we made early on was to focus on the Key Competencies. Each of the Key Competencies was explored using the following focus points.

1. This competency involves ...
2. This competency empowers the learner ...
3. This competency can be taught and modelled through ...

After this initial activity the school engaged students and parents in the discussion and exploration of the key competencies. A shared understanding is identified as important in the successful introduction of the competencies into the curriculum by Oates (2001) in Hipkins (2006).

Over time we have reviewed and refined our understandings of the Key Competencies developing our Papanui child goals and aligning them with the Key competencies. Hipkins (2006) identifies issues that schools and teachers would have to manage when implementing the Key Competencies these include, “We already do that and we haven’t got time” as well as need for the Key Competencies:

- to be understood and developed holistically;
- richly described and not atomised
- seen as a whole, not just the sum of its parts;
- interact dynamically with curriculum knowledge;

Definitions

It has been determined that key competencies are complex. This is confirmed when one looks closely at the literature. The NZC’s description of Managing Self includes in its description the following;

This competency is associated with self-motivation, a “can-do” attitude, and with students seeing themselves as capable learners. It is integral to self-assessment.

Students who manage themselves are enterprising, resourceful, reliable, and resilient. They establish personal goals, make plans, manage projects, and set high standards. They have strategies for meeting challenges. They know when to lead, when to follow, and when and how to act independently. (NZC p 12)

Hipkins (2006) added to this discussion about key competencies and included the following in an explanation of Managing Self;

- Setting, working towards and monitoring goals
- Being organised and ready to learn
- Reflective self awareness
- Aspects of physical health – fitness and relaxation
- Self awareness – strengths and weaknesses (cognition and metacognition)
- Being willing and able to use this self-knowledge

Using Managing Self as the focus I was interested to see how other schools had interpreted this Key Competency in their setting. Boyd and Watson (2006) noted in their student survey data that teachers’ priorities were centred around creating a positive classroom environment. This was borne out in a few classes I visited where Managing Self had indicators which included having pencils ready for work, working quietly putting hands up etc. These are not necessarily bad or wrong and in fact but if they are what I would call the surface feature of the Competency in question.

Other observations I made while visiting indicated that teachers and schools had moved beyond the “I am managing myself by finishing my work quietly” a ‘surface feature’ to ‘deeper’ understandings that provide opportunities for children and

their teachers to develop rich learning conversations so that children are more actively involved in their learning. The following link is to one such school <http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/School-stories/Digital-stories/Kelburn-Normal-School>

Implementation

The literature pointed to schools and teachers having to make shifts in teaching. Simply changing a report form from essential skills to key competencies with its three smiley faces, or adding the KCs to a planning sheet to be highlighted by the teacher, really does not meet the intent of the revised curriculum.

The revised curriculum has two distinct parts. The front strengthens the How and Why of teaching and is very much based upon a socio-cultural philosophy. The schools that have, and continue to, explore and experiment with the elements of this section are strengthening their teachers pedagogical understanding and practice.

The second part as the division of the learning areas into achievement objectives and to my mind doesn't sit comfortably with the pedagogical section. The idea of breaking learning up into areas, levels and objectives changes the focus to coverage and a 'checklisted' behaviourist approach to curriculum delivery.

Hipkins et al in *The Collaborative Path to Implementation* (2009) has collated the experiences of sixteen schools' journeys in implementing the revised curriculum and is great read to reflect and compare, and to find affirmation and challenges. It summarises well by that the process is *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary* and the following points;

- Just get started,
- You are not on your own,
- It takes time,
- It's complex, and
- Take risks.

More schools 'journeys are available to view at;

<http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/School-stories/Digital-stories>

With respect to the Key Competencies, when defining and developing a shared understanding, the challenge is not to break them up into a set of easily observed or identified behaviours to be taught and assessed in isolation. The key competencies are interconnected, contingent upon the context and need to be viewed holistically.

Assessment

Hipkins conversation starter *Assessing Key Competencies: Why Would We? How Could We?*(2007) poses these questions.

- Might key competencies represent different sorts of learning outcomes?
- If so, do the key competencies introduce different types of assessment challenges, and how should we respond to these challenges?

- Do we want assessment information about key competencies for the purposes we already know, or might there be new purposes here as well?

The key competencies are more complex than skills. Unlike skills, competencies include all the requirements of a task – knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and they are developed in contexts that have personal relevance. Hipkins (2006) talks about students:

- Being ready – recognising when it is relevant to use certain skills, knowledge and values
- Being willing – motivated to use them and complete a task
- Being able – knowing how to do so

The complexity of the key competencies brings with it the challenge of assessment. Students can not achieve or master a competence. They can only demonstrate competence in a particular setting and context. Their level or degree of competence may vary according to the context and situational factors. Hipkins (2006) notes that the inclusion of attitudes and values brings challenges to assessment. She also explores the concepts of adaptation or transference:

In this view, competencies can only be assessed when the assessment situation allows for adaptation to a new context to be demonstrated. (p.8)

A student's development in the key competencies is investigated by Carr (2006a). She identifies four dimensions of strengthening key competencies;

- Mindfulness – learners taking the initiative, motivation
- Frequency – competencies will develop over time
- Breadth – in contexts that are increasingly wide-ranging
- Complexity – in contexts that are increasingly complex

Schools will need data that provides evidence that a key competency has been strengthened in a particular learning experience. The opportunity for students to be mindful and to be involved in self assessment is mentioned as being important by Carr (2006a).

Assessment that involves reflectiveness is seen as pivotal in the key competencies (DeSeCo Executive Summary, 2005)

The need for individuals to think and act reflectively is central to the key competencies. Reflectiveness involves ...the ability to deal with change, learn from experience and think and act with a critical stare. (p.5)

This growing self awareness will enable the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and with the right supports start to set realistic goals, or as Hipkins (2006) states it, start to "live and learn strategically".

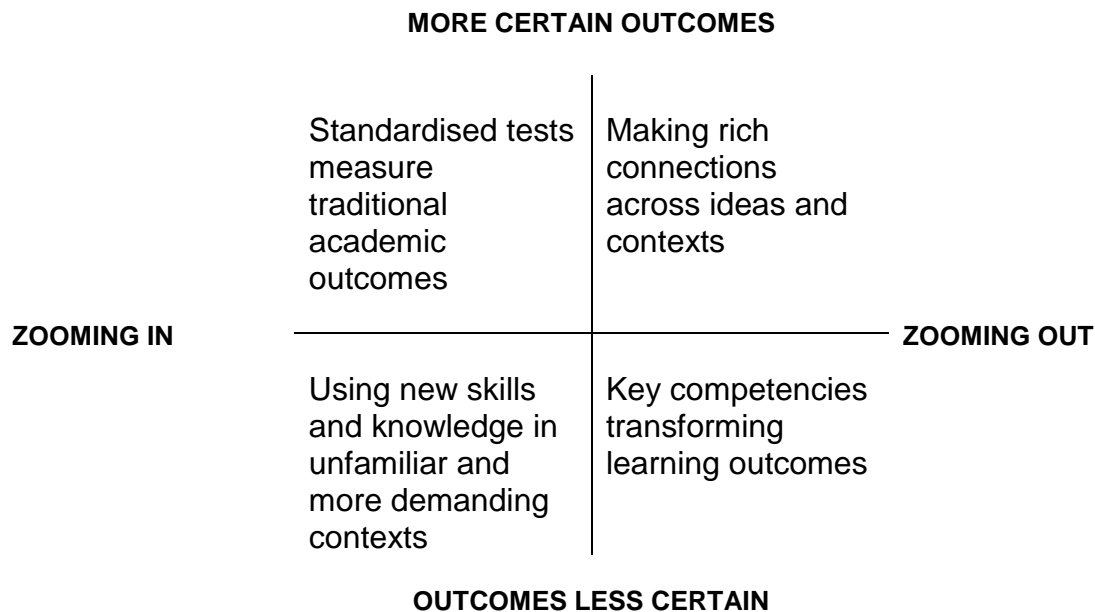


Figure 1 adapted from slide presented by Hipkins

Learning is a “complex performance” from Hipkins discussion, suggesting that the assessment of Key Competencies is a “complex performance. The models underpinning the assessment of a “complex performance” are different from those underpinning academic achievement.

Hipkins (2006) identifies assessment strategies that could be considered suitable with the Key Competencies;

- Learning logs or journals
- Learning Story
- Portfolios
- Rich tasks

Interestingly she writes about rubrics and matrices advising that their appropriateness for the assessment of key competencies may be limited.

Learning Stories

Learning Stories have come from the ECE sector and with the alignment of the NZC with Te Whariki it is not surprising to see good practice being shared. Our AP shared her experience of enthusiastic new entrants speaking confidently about their learning through their learning stories.

At Papanui interest started in Learning Stories with the AP working in an ECE – Primary cross sector group. This led to the DP attending a one day workshop and from there Learning Stories were introduced to the staff.

Narrative assessment, which includes learning stories, is a tool to capture “complex performances”. It gives the opportunity for the child and the teacher to engage in a conversation of the “construction and reconstruction of the learning” in a meaningful context.

Learning stories provide data that is more interpretive and reflective. It has the potential to capture the values and attitudes, those features that differentiate the Key Competencies from the essential skills.

The adaption of Learning Stories in the primary sector will pose challenges for schools and teachers. Workload and manageability are the obvious ones but the initial and most important is the alignment of Learning Stories to the philosophy and pedagogy of the school. If it perceived as an add-on or a compliance issue of three learning stories per term the opportunity to develop assessment that will foster lifelong learning could be compromised.

A number of schools I visited have started to use learning stories. It would appear from my observations and the experiences of Papanui that teachers’ understanding and use of learning does go through stages of development . initially the ‘whole class’ experience is a good starting point but as teachers’ confidence grows and the children become engaged there is a shift to more ‘personalisation’. The TO, WITH and BY model in reading applies in this situation.

NZCER are in the process of developing a “Kick Start” resource on Learning Stories. This will prove a valuable resource as schools look to develop assessment methods that support the development of children’s key competencies by encouraging engagement in, and reflection upon, their learning across the curriculum, as well as their life and learning beyond school.

SUMMARY

Somewhat ironically my sabbatical and school visits coincided with the opening National Standards workshops. The teachers and principals I intended to talk to about our ‘new’ curriculum and the key competencies were busy dealing with new challenges.

The challenge for us as professionals is to balance the three broad purposes for assessment Hipkins (2007)

- Accountability and reporting - summative
- Improving teaching and learning - formative
- Fostering lifelong learning – a focus on dispositions and actions. Students directly involved in their learning and in thinking about their success in terms of learning to learn, with the aim of empowering them to continue learning at home and beyond school

Implications for Papanui

- Continue the development of learning stories
- Continue to strengthen the key competencies and the vision of the school into classroom programmes, school wide systems and the school culture.

A final thought from Stirling's *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*:

We are used to hearing our schools assailed by critics who want to know why 'Johnny can't read, Johnny can't write' and who call for a return to 'the basics'But why do we stop worrying there? . . . Why no worry that Johnny can't dance, can't paint, can't breathe, can't meditate, can't relax, can't cope with anxiety, aggression, envy, can't express trust and tenderness? . . . that Johnny doesn't know who he is?

(p.43)

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