

## EDITORIAL

### What matters in the curriculum?

**Andy Begg**

This year, New Zealand's Ministry of Education published a draft curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006), as part of the consultative process associated with the development of the next school curriculum. Whether this document is a major perturbation to our curriculum thinking remains to be seen, but I assume that most paradigm shifts cause some unrest. The publication seems somewhat premature—as some sections had not been completed—which suggests that the political agenda may have outweighed other considerations. The proposed timeline also reinforced this; dates for the final version, and for implementation, were forecast, and I wondered whether the time frame was such that—if feedback requesting significant change was forthcoming—it could be given due consideration. However, knowing the extent and nature of feedback that has been received when draft documents have previously been published, perhaps the timelines are not unreasonable.

As I looked through the draft curriculum, some features simultaneously delighted and concerned me—features such as: being less prescriptive; giving more professional autonomy to teachers and schools; and the key competencies (in particular, the emphasis on thinking).

The less prescriptive aspect of the curriculum allows more freedom to experiment, and should encourage the development of alternative classroom tasks and activities that are suitable for particular students in their local environments, and that are somewhat more holistic than with tightly-defined objectives. On the other hand, when the curriculum does not provide the level of specificity that teachers are accustomed to, they may simply continue to use their old school schemes and lesson plans. Also, although the curriculum is less prescriptive, at some levels—in particular in the senior school—this freedom could well be curtailed by the assessment industry, that still seems to operate in a paradigm of easily measurable objectives.

Related to the less prescriptive nature of the curriculum, is the acknowledgement of the professional autonomy of teachers and schools. “Lead” teachers of the profession have always claimed such autonomy, and it is hoped that others will follow their lead. I see an increased emphasis on the co-operative planning of school schemes—an emphasis on school curriculum documents that bridge the gap between teachers’ lesson plans and the national curriculum—as a way of developing such autonomy.

Such planning should involve not merely deciding what and how to teach a topic, but discussing alternative approaches, empowering individual teachers to experiment, reflecting on the experiences, and feeding this reflection back into the planning process. Again, though, my fear is that professional autonomy also allows the less adventuresome teacher to stay with their time-worn teaching methods. I anticipate that some of these teachers will ask why they have to “reinvent the wheel”, and feel that more specific direction is desirable. My belief is that it is not a matter of “reinventing the wheel”, but rather one of becoming more familiar with an idea or task, and making it one’s own.

I have always believed that the most important direction for education is provided by one’s espoused aims of education. I am not sure why “aims” need to be renamed “key competencies”, but regardless of labels, I see these as being not too different from previous aims—such as encouraging the urge to enquire, the desire for self-respect, and the concern for others—i.e., as I wrote in my editorial last year (Begg, 2005), linked with the cognitive, personal, and social aims of education.

My concern with the competencies (thinking, making meaning, relating to others, managing self, and participating and contributing), as with the preliminary pages of past curriculum documents, is that while they are likely to be totally acceptable to teachers, they are not linked with the learning areas in the curriculum that are the part of the document teachers usually focus on, and are therefore likely to be given little attention. My hope is that, in developing school schemes, these competencies are kept in mind, and that the traditional subject focus is modified by discussions about teaching and learning, and by fostering the development of the competencies. Wenger (1998, pp. 4–5) suggests one way in which some competencies might be integrated into practice. He identified the

components necessary to characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing, and saw these components as including:

- meaning: learning as experiencing;
- practice: learning as doing;
- community: learning as belonging; and
- identity: learning as becoming.

I have heard it said that the benefit of education is evident from what one knows after one has forgotten what one learnt at school. This suggests that the “habits of mind”, or thinking skills, are very important. This highlighting of thinking seems to be a worthwhile development from the traditional focus on content knowledge. Indeed, I would see every subject as having at least four overlapping aspects: content knowledge (knowing); process knowledge (doing); personal knowledge (thinking); and creativity (making). My concern is that, within the learning areas, there has been little attempt to focus on either the common or the unique contributions of thinking within each subject. For example, from my particular background within mathematics education, I see the key element of thinking as “generalising”, and my colleague (Mason, personal communication, 2002) often said that “a lesson without the opportunity to generalise is not a lesson in mathematics”. The lack of connection between thinking and the learning areas concerns me, because thinking has not been stressed in previous curriculum documents, and teachers are likely to need guidance with this way of looking at their work.

One other aspect of thinking and the cognitive domain concerns me. Cognition is about knowing, but not all knowing is rational or logical—much of what we know is bodily knowledge and intuitive knowledge, and these suggest the development of “awareness” which links with self-knowledge. I have deliberately used the term self-knowledge; I think that self-management does not go far enough, and self-respect is only a little better. Hart (2001) sees wisdom as being about knowing oneself, and claims that there is no way to force this process of self-discovery. He wrote that:

... wisdom cuts to what is of importance but not through calculations or shrewdness. The deepest insights, the authentic revelation, the healing

## *Curriculum Matters*

vision, often come more directly, as an intuition. Such insight is described as inner experience or inner knowing to indicate that we intimately embody this knowing within ourselves. (p. 4)

If, as teachers, we are concerned that our students develop self-knowledge, then we will also be concerned with what we might do to assist them. If one is concerned with such a “spiritual” curriculum, then one might say “the emerging self is the curriculum”.

My delights and concerns with these aspects of the draft must be considered within the reality of curriculum development, in which writing and publishing a document are only one part of the process. In the past, with the RDD—research, development, and dissemination—approach to development, the other first stage involved some research, and the third stage was the dissemination or implementation that followed publication. While such a three-tiered programme was usually envisaged as taking three or four years, the reality was that it was a continuous process, with new curriculum documents simply providing stimulus for change every 10 or so years. Now that the development process is visualised as being more complex, and as continuous, perhaps my concerns are not too worrisome, but it does seem to me that what might make a difference is what follows the promulgation of the curriculum.

Historically, a new curriculum document was often followed by the publication of teacher guides, and the organisation of professional development courses. I wonder what teachers might want this time. I imagine they will seek resources and development activities, as they have in the past, but I would conjecture that it might be more useful to develop a parallel curriculum, using possible classroom tasks and activities as the basis, rather than topic headings. Such a parallel document might provoke teachers, and challenge those concerned with the assessed curriculum at all levels (school assessment, standards monitoring, and assessment for external qualifications), by presenting more holistic activities that could be used for multiple-level teaching with a number of linked objectives in mind.

I have briefly discussed five issues: the development process; less prescription; more autonomy; the key competencies; and the place of

thinking within the curriculum. The articles in this yearbook reflect these issues and highlight others. The first two focus on specific curriculum areas—one on social studies, and one on the literacy curriculum. The following five are concerned with more general issues, specifically: key competencies; the literary curriculum and denial of background; thinking; the senior curriculum; and students' voice. The final four relate to the development process, and are concerned with: the influence of the English and French contexts on a curriculum area; five conceptions of curriculum; the development process in the past; and further background to the current draft curriculum. While these papers are mainly concerned with the school curriculum, it is hoped that future articles will broaden this to include more on early childhood, adult education curriculum, and other curriculum concerns.

## References

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## The author

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