

EDITORIAL

Curriculum change and teacher resistance

Carol Mutch

Educational change in New Zealand has been a hot topic in 2012. We have faced cutbacks, closures, charter schools and league tables, not to mention the ‘rejuvenation and consolidation’ of Christchurch schools following the 2010/2011 earthquakes. A common reaction has been resistance—from teachers, principals, teacher unions, academics and, in the cases of class sizes and the Christchurch closures and amalgamations, also from parents and boards of trustees. Much of the writing on resistance to educational change (see, for example, Zimmerman, 2006) offers strategies for gaining compliance and successfully implementing the mandated change. Such writing presumes that the changes are necessary, appropriate and will bring about the predetermined benefits without any detrimental effects or unintended consequences. Those of us who have been constantly buffeted by the winds of educational change tend to be a little more wary. Many recent changes in New Zealand education have barely had time to be implemented before the next one is imposed. Given this situation it is hardly surprising that the first reaction is resistance. While teachers are often accused by politicians and the general public as being defiantly resistant to change, I want to take the side of teachers and ask if resistance to change is necessarily a bad thing. The Minister of Education’s back-down over several recent educational policy directions highlights that not all policies are equally well-researched, carefully planned or subject to rigorous stakeholder consultation. In this regard, it was heartening to read a blog by highly-regarded educationist Larry Cuban (2011). Although writing about the situation in the United States, his comments ring true in the New Zealand context. He begins:

In the midst of both teacher praise and teacher bashing nowadays abides a nagging but persistent assumption among state and federal policymakers hellbent on the standards–testing–accountability agenda, charter school

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operators, and high-tech enthusiasts for online instruction that most teachers resist change.

Cuban goes on to argue that teachers have changed over time and continue to change but that the changes are incremental. He notes that such changes are unobserved and unnoticed by policy makers—and I would add certainly not celebrated. He continues, “Moreover, the past 30 years of high-profile criticism of failing U.S. schools produced a tsunami of top-down reforms showing little trust in teachers’ professional judgment.” While the past 30 years in New Zealand have provided teachers and others in the education community with more opportunities than the US to participate in and even drive change—the development of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) being two examples (see, Mutch & Trim, in press) but that the current climate of high accountability, low trust, economically driven, top-down change has seen that engagement turn to resistance. Cuban defends teachers in this way:

Policymakers determine the worth of proposed changes in curricular, instructional, and school practices on the criteria of *organizational* effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. Teachers accept, modify, and reject innovations and mandates on the basis of similar criteria but with the focus on *students* and *classrooms*. In doing so, they ask substantially different questions than policymakers who focus on the system, not individual classrooms.

While schools refusing to implement National Standards or communities protesting against school closures make the headlines as overt acts of resistance, there are other ways in which teachers protest, resist, or make changes in their own way and in their own time. In many centres, classrooms, schools and tertiary institutions, teachers might respond to top-down change with immediate outrage, deliberate avoidance, partial adoption, major adaptation, sneaky subversion or even quiet revolution. When we trust teachers and educational leaders to make decisions based on their professional judgement, their years of experience, their commitment to students’ learning and their engagement with their communities, these acts are more likely to be thoughtful and positive rather than negative and detrimental.

It is these positive acts of thoughtful critique that this issue of *Curriculum Matters* celebrates. While some authors in this issue take an overt and deliberate stand against current curricular and educational policy directions, others quietly keep progressive ideals alive through their creative, reflective and innovative practices. Both approaches hold the curriculum and its concomitant pedagogical practices up to scrutiny, and we can learn much from their willingness to share their personal soul-searching and their insightful investigations.

Barbara Ormond opens this issue with an article based on a puzzling observation. In her work as an achievement standards designer, a subject association member and a teacher educator across history, art history, classical studies and social studies, she noticed that these different senior secondary school subjects reached very different outcomes in terms of the amount of prescription or freedom they afforded teachers in selecting and assessing content. In order to examine this phenomenon more deeply, she investigated how these differences unfolded during the Alignment Standards Project, the aim of which was to bring the intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) closer together. By analysing key documents and informal subject association discussions, she was able to conclude that a key answer to the puzzle lay in the way that teachers engaged in those subject areas framed what knowledge was of most importance, who determined this, and how this determination was implemented. This article hits at the very heart of the ideas raised in the opening paragraphs of this editorial. How do teachers come to an understanding of the essence of curriculum? Why and how do teachers adopt or resist change? What matters spark resistance and how do different levels of engagement in change produce different outcomes?

The resistance that Lesley Lyons wants to promote is to the way in which the early childhood education and care sector is being influenced by neo-liberal ideology to ignore the full rights of children in favour of a for-profit marketplace. Her concern is for all children but, in particular, children with disabilities, who, she argues, are being constrained by a deficit model in which those who do not fit the 'norm' are viewed as 'other'. Lyons outlines how the role of the state in early childhood education and care has

been slowly eroded. With the move to privatisation comes the economic imperatives of efficiency, effectiveness and performance. Put these trends alongside the trickle-down effects of policies in the compulsory schooling sector, such as National Standards, and the opportunity for children with disabilities to access a curriculum appropriate to their needs in a fully inclusive setting becomes even more illusory.

Juliette Laird is also critical of neo-liberal influences on curriculum. Her particular interest is in what she terms, “the marginal status of visual arts education in the primary classroom.” The recent re-publication of Elwyn Richardson’s book, *In the Early World* (Richardson, 2012) reminds us that the arts were at the heart of progressive child-centred educational practices that defined our vision of the primary classroom throughout much of the middle of the 20th century. Laird wanted to find out what was preventing today’s teachers from engaging in arts-based teaching. She finds that constant curricular change, including combining all the arts into one learning area, and neo-liberal views on what constitutes relevant educational outcomes, have eroded teachers’ self-efficacy. She states, “When curriculum reform runs counter to teachers’ beliefs as to desirable outcomes for students, and undermines what they know to be effective pedagogical practice, this creates a dissonance which reduces their effectiveness”. In this context, teachers’ confusion, frustration, lack of confidence or resistance is understandable.

Another of the arts subjects, this time drama, is the focus of Michelle Johansson’s article. Using the context of Pasifika representation in NCEA drama texts, she argues for teachers to develop cultural efficacy, in particular to reconsider how the texts they choose might serve to reproduce cultural stereotypes and negative constructions. Johansson’s article again asks the big questions about what knowledge is worthwhile and who determines this. Citing Adams, Openshaw and Hamer (2005, p. 215), she echoes the concerns of other authors in this issue: “If it is true ‘that curricula *normalize* a particular view of the world that is then put into practice within an educational context [and] if this ‘normal’ view of the world becomes the accepted body of knowledge and is treated as though it were equally significant and important for all groups’... we must question what effect this ‘normal’ view might have on students’

construction of identity.” She argues that as drama texts can be used to affirm or refute constructions of identity, they should be used wisely—as a tool for empowerment and equity not to belittle or silence.

Another curriculum area to feel the effects of neo-liberal discourse on the construction of its educational outcomes is physical education. Kylie Thompson views the role of the physical education curriculum in cultivating a particular type of person (or body) through critical citizenship lens. Using a model by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), which talks of *personally responsible, participatory* and *justice-oriented* citizens, she matches physical education outcomes with citizenship attributes. Fitness programmes, for example, she claims encourage personal responsibility, self-discipline and hard work, whereas sports leadership and volunteerism approaches foster participatory citizens. Thompson concludes by stating that tensions arise when, “young people are educated to be personally responsible, competent, productive and compliant citizens, yet there are obvious demands in democratic societies for active, critical and justice oriented citizens.”

Returning to the theme of the demise of child-centred pedagogies and progressive curricula, Trevor Thwaites gives an account of the way in which Auckland teacher, Ruth Round, bases her classroom programme around music. He explains that Ruth’s teaching is underpinned by her belief that “music is an art, a discipline, a language and a vehicle of instruction.” Through music, Ruth integrates language learning, poetry and art. Children learn by listening, responding, moving, talking and creating. Thwaites puts this approach to teaching into a Vygotskyian theoretical context, where expansive learning allows for appropriation and interiorisation. Thus, the potential of the curriculum to transform and expand rather than direct and constrain can be fully realised. Not one mention of National Standards—is this resistance or quiet revolution?

Building on his 2008 *Curriculum Matters* article, in which he applauded the inclusion of Learning Languages in the 2007 curriculum, Martin East attempts to explain why the potential of this curriculum area has not been realised. One explanation resides in the dominance of English as the tool of global communication. Another explanation, and this is the one expanded upon in this article, is the disjunction between the real-

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world use of language and the pervasive use of transmissive pedagogies. East also promotes student-centred and experiential pedagogies as the way to engage students in meaningful and authentic learning. He goes on to discuss ‘task-based language teaching’ as a particular strategy that teachers have used with some success to improve both student motivation and achievement, “thereby alleviating the challenges of demotivated students, low enrolments and attrition” in this curriculum area.

Finding ways to engage students, use authentic contexts and increase students’ understanding is also behind the work of Sashi Sharma, Phil Doyle, Viney Shandil and Semisi Talakia'atu. Their context is the teaching and assessment of statistical literacy to Year 9 students. They also link the importance of mastering statistical literacy to help students become critical thinkers rather than passive receptors of information. In order to do this, they adapted a method drawn from the literature to produce a four-stage framework to assess students’ thinking in statistical literacy for both formative and summative purposes. The four stages are informal/idiosyncratic, consistent noncritical, early critical and advanced critical. Such skills, I would argue, are relevant across the curriculum, not just in mathematics and statistics. And important for life.

The final article by Billy O’Steen and Lane Perry rounds off this issue by tying together many of the issue’s themes—freedom versus autonomy, authentic learning contexts, student-centred pedagogy, and teacher-led curriculum adaptation. The authors ask, “what happens if the local context where a higher education curriculum is being delivered shifts in a dramatic and undeniable way?” Their context was the 2010/2011 earthquakes, which did indeed change the lives of students at the University of Canterbury in undeniably dramatic ways, both literally and figuratively. In the last issue of *Curriculum Matters* (Mutch, 2011), I highlighted the role of Christchurch students as participatory citizens through efforts such as the Student Volunteer Army. Using the concept of service-learning, the course *CHCH101* allowed students to gain credit for their actions in helping the residents of Christchurch with the massive clean-up task. What surprised the authors, however, was not just that students benefitted from participating in volunteerism and gaining credit for this but that it made them re-think their previously held assumptions and fostered their skills of critical thinking.

Throughout this issue, the authors of the various articles have demonstrated that teachers do not just blindly and stubbornly resist change as might be portrayed elsewhere but that they embrace, create, drive and celebrate change. The difference is that their notion of change puts what is best for their students at the very heart of this change. This issue of *Curriculum Matters* highlights that teachers from all sectors, early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary are constantly searching for ways to create a curriculum that is relevant, engaging, purposeful, challenging and forward-thinking. Resistance is not always a knee-jerk reaction; it is often a moral and ethical stance.

It is fitting to close with an excerpt from another high-profile American educationist, William (Bill) Ayres, who wrote a passionate letter of both congratulations and caution to President Obama following the recent election. Ayres speaks for and to all teachers:

Education is a fundamental human right, not a product. In a free society education is based on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being; it's constructed on the principle that the fullest development of all is the condition for the full development of each, and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is the condition for the full development of all. Further, while schooling in every totalitarian society on earth foregrounds obedience and conformity, education in a democracy emphasizes initiative, courage, imagination, and entrepreneurship in order to encourage students to develop minds of their own.

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The author

Carol Mutch is an associate professor in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the University of Auckland. Formerly a teacher, teacher educator and policy advisor, Carol's research and writing interests are in educational research and evaluation, curriculum and education policy, social sciences and citizenship education.