



A Cautionary Tale: What are the signs telling us? Curriculum versus standards reflected in schools planning

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 11, Issue 2, 221-231, 2014

ANTHONY FISHER & BILL USSHER

University of Waikato

ABSTRACT

The revised New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) was introduced in 2007 and seen as an opportunity for schools and communities to work together to provide a curriculum that reflected local needs. The NZC identifies learning areas providing students with the foundation on which they can develop and later specialise. It would be expected that this broad base would be reflected in schools' Charters and Strategic or Annual Plans. A small-scale initial investigation reviewing documentation for 2012 of 16 schools was undertaken. The resulting review identified that the schools' plans focussed primarily on National Standards. There was limited identification of specific Learning Areas other than Literacy and Numeracy in regards to school targets, professional development, budget or school priorities. This review suggests that predictions of the implementation of National Standards in New Zealand schools narrowing the school curriculum is, indeed, becoming a reality.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is devised to provide guidance for teachers and schools in the learning of knowledge, skills and attitudes for students. As Bradley (2004) identified, "The curriculum is the plan made for guiding learning in the schools..." (p. 25). The revised New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) introduced in 2007 has continued the reforms of the 1990s by promoting further opportunities for schools and communities to be partners working together to provide a curriculum that reflects the particular needs of each community (Lange, 1988). The New Zealand curriculum has taken a wider, more comprehensive and inclusive perspective since 1993. This has been heralded as a guided opportunity for schools and communities to identify what learning is important and to recognise the convergence of knowledge and pedagogy, local community, diverse cultures and societal factors (O'Neill, 2005). This is expressed in the two Ministry of Education documents *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (2008). The NZC has the premise of a student-centred curriculum, with broad directions for learning combined with the capacity for schools to tailor the curriculum to their specific communities, populations and local contexts (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2007). The NZC

was developed with the aim of ensuring “that all young New Zealanders are equipped with the knowledge, competencies, and values they will need to be successful citizens in the twenty-first century” (MoE, 2007, p. 4).

The curriculum document provides a guide or framework for compulsory schooling education; however the content of the document is often translated into two aspects. The national curriculum is interpreted by the school and teachers and translated into a school curriculum and then teachers develop this in to the planned curriculum for their classroom teaching (Bolstad, 2006). Bolstad identifies two further aspects of the curriculum, namely the

assessed curriculum (the part of students’ learning that is assessed or measured) and the hidden curriculum (the implicit messages and meanings or values that learners construct about school, themselves, other people, the world, or a society, based on their total school experience of schooling). (p. 33)

This view of having these two further differing levels suggests that curriculum development is not a finished product but is a dynamic and continuous process (Begg, 1998; McGee, 2012, Ussher, 2001). This dynamism is reflected in the NZC, which has come to be seen as an innovative document that considers the wider aspects of education and schooling:

It takes as its starting point a vision of our young people as lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved. It includes a clear set of principles on which to base curriculum decision-making. It sets out values that are to be encouraged, modelled, and explored. It defines five key competencies that are critical to sustained learning and effective participation in society and that underline the emphasis on lifelong learning. (MoE, 2007, p. 4)

A threat in this layering of the curriculum is the loss of the essence and intent of the NZC through the mediation, interpretation and translation by a range of groups and individuals (Ussher, 2001). It is critical that the essence of the document, as developed through a wide consultative process, is maintained throughout this layering and that the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) are adhered to. The current NAGs identify four school administration principles of conduct and administration. In relation to the curriculum, NAG 1 states that, “Each board of trustees is required to foster student achievement by providing teaching and learning programmes which incorporate the national curriculum as expressed in *The New Zealand Curriculum or Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*” (MoE, 2013, n.p.). This is further expressed in terms of student outcomes in section (a)i of NAG 1: “to provide all students in years 1-10 with opportunities to achieve success in all areas of the National Curriculum” (MoE, 2013, n.p.).

NAG 2 then goes on to make links with schools’ strategic planning: “to develop a strategic plan which documents how they are giving effect to the National Educational Guidelines through their policies, plans and programmes, including those for curriculum.” The National Educational Guidelines (NEGs) are defined by Section 60A of the 1989 Education Act. There are five parts to the

NEGs with Parts 2 and 3 (Ministry of Education, 2013) providing clear direction and implication for schools in regards to curriculum implementation:

2. **Foundation Curriculum Policy Statements**, which are statements of policy concerning teaching, learning and assessment that are made for the purposes of underpinning and giving direction to –

- i. The way in which curriculum and assessment responsibilities are to be managed in schools:
- ii. National curriculum statements and locally developed curriculum.

3. **National Curriculum Statements** (that is to say statements of:

- i. The areas of knowledge and understanding to be covered by students; and
- ii. The skills to be developed by students; and
- iii. Desirable levels of knowledge, understanding, and skill, to be achieved by students during the years of schooling. (n.p.)

Despite the restrictions that could have been perceived from the NAG and NEG statements there was an air of innovation and freedom associated with the introduction of the NZC beginning with its trialling in 2006. This allowed teachers, schools and communities to develop a localised curriculum that reflected the wider aspects of the document and the needs and aspirations of the local school community. However as Caldwell (2010) notes, “innovation, creativity and passion are alive and well in many settings, but...schools are increasingly constrained by a command and control approach that is leading to unprecedented levels of centralisation, standardisation and bureaucratisation” (np.). These constraints that schools are facing reflect a continued trend of a move towards a more standardised environment and accountability to ensure that the centralised standards are being achieved. This resulted in the introduction of the New Zealand curriculum National Standards (NS) in 2009.

The NS were introduced by the Minister of Education at the time who suggested New Zealand has a “world-leading curriculum that sets out...learning areas for our schools and students” (Tolley, 2009, p. 4). The introduction of the NS and the mandatory requirements of the NEGs and NAGs has had an impact on the initial heralded vision of the NZC with its wider, more comprehensive and inclusive view. The updated NAG and NEG statements place National Standards as a central feature, (included in NAGs 2, 2A and 8 and NEG 4), requiring schools to implement and report student progress and achievement against the standards. In Australia, similar debates were occurring (Caldwell, 2010), where the original intent was to make curriculum innovative, creative and provide opportunities for learners across a wide range of learning areas. This may now be lost with the focus on a prescribed national curriculum and a national testing programme (Nelson, 2011). Anecdotal information suggests that this sentiment was and is similar to the concerns raised within the New Zealand context, where the NZC clearly identifies as one of its principles, “Coherence: The curriculum offers all students a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions and opens up pathways for future learning” (MoE, 2007, p. 9). National Standards focus narrowly instead on the reporting of progress, achievement and curriculum on numeracy and literacy.

These requirements are to be reflected in school targets set each year and reported to the Ministry of Education. As a guiding school document, Charters, which incorporate Strategic Plans and Annual Plans, should reflect the wider vision of the curriculum, which was heralded as being innovative and exciting, creating opportunities for communities to have an input into their local school curriculum, rather than focussing on the areas identified as the National Standards (reading, writing and numeracy) against which all children in Years 1-8 will be judged. This study set out to review the documentation of a selection of schools to ascertain if these documents reflected the wider curriculum, or if there was a narrowing of the curriculum focus due to the introduction of the NS and the subsequent reporting requirements introduced.

METHOD

School charters, which specifically identified school targets for 2013 from a small selection of primary and intermediate schools across the greater Waikato area of New Zealand, were analysed. From the Education Review Office (ERO) website, schools were selected that had received an ERO review during the second half of 2012 and for whom it had been recommended that the review cycle would be a four-to-five year period. ERO decides the timing of review cycles based on the outcome of its Education Review of a school.

The decision to select schools that had received a four-to-five year review timing was based on the fact that these schools were considered by the reviewing officers to be schools performing at a high level. This is reflected in the name of this extended cycle, "Education Review: Arotake Paehiranga which reflects the whakatauki: Tekuna te paehiranga kia topa – let excellence soar!" (ERO, n.d.). A criterion of having a four-to-five year cycle for the next Education Review is that "learners experience a coherent and rich curriculum that provides them with relevant choices and pathways and support" (ERO, n.d.). As such, the assumption was made that the documents guiding the school curriculum would reflect the wider New Zealand curriculum. It is fair to note that some schools are offered these longer review cycles but opt for a shorter cycle.

In this period there were 33 schools reviewed that were classified as a contributing (years 1-6), full primary (years 1-8) or intermediate (years 7-8). This group of schools made up the potential sample for further investigation. Once the schools had been identified, their web sites were accessed to ascertain if school charters which included specific school targets for 2013, were available to the public. Eighteen of the schools indicated they had such documents available on their school web site. These schools then became the sample group and their documentation was analysed for evidence of NZC Learning areas being identified.

Document analysis is the systematic process of reviewing documents that are retrievable as either a printed or electronic format (Bowen, 2009). A systematic process is required to interrupt the data in order to elicit meaning and to gain understanding. The procedure requires the researcher to find, select, appraise and synthesise the data in order to gain understanding or knowledge. Usually, document analysis produces major themes, categories or case examples via content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). In this study the documents were analysed with regard to the specific targets or focus areas identified in the school charters.

Document analysis was chosen as it was the most reliable source of comparative data for this study. There are a number of advantages and limitations that impact on the choice of documents as the main source of data. In this particular study, however, this was seen as an efficient method for gathering reliable data and it was also easily accessible. Documents are also considered to be “unobtrusive and ‘non-reactive’” (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). The actual process of gathering data had no effect on the data gathered.

FINDINGS

Of the 33 schools identified by ERO as performing at a high level and deserving of a four to five year review cycle, 18 schools indicated that their charters were on their website. However, two of these schools’ documentation could not be accessed as they were password protected. A summary of the characteristics of the remaining 16 schools is described below:

School	Type of School C = Contributing F = Full primary I - Intermediate	Location U = Urban R = Rural	Decile	School Roll
A	C	U	3	157
B	C	U	4	313
C	C	U	6	578
D	I	U	1	751
E	F	U	8	247
F	C	U	9	553
G	C	U	6	454
H	F	U	4	361
I	F	U	6	167
J	F	R	8	103
K	C	U	1	84
L	I	U	9	518
M	F	R	10	147
N	F	R	3	219
O	C	U	10	517
P	C	R	9	455

Table 1: Summary of sample schools

Though this sample was limited it could be considered to have provided a representative picture of the primary school sector due to the range of schools and their identified characteristics.

All schools identified their school targets as required by legislation, to reflect the requirements of the NZC National Standards. One school provided only a summary on-line, which identified target areas but did not state the actual targets. Seven of the schools identified other targets or focus areas as they called them, which reflected aspects wider than literacy and numeracy. Examples of other focus areas included engaging learners, teaching excellence, or school-wide aspects such as school systems, organisation or wider

community involvement. In relation to other learning areas from the NZC, three schools identified aspects as being a target or focus area. These identified targets included the arts, ICT, Te Reo Māori, Science and Technology. Where identified, the goals or focus areas mainly reflected wider aspects of curriculum such as key competencies. Though these aspects reflected wider areas of the curriculum, the targets were of a general nature and did not provide any specific detail. These points are illustrated by School J which is summarised below.

Descriptive Features	Targets/Strategic Goals/Focuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full primary • Decile 8 • Rural • Roll 103 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy and numeracy targets identified • Strategic Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - student conferencing - developing a school vision for eLearning • Focus areas for school development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional development vision for staff - Cross cluster OTJ moderation - Environmental education - Sustainable funding for ICT

Table 2. School J summary

Across all 16 schools there was no noticeable difference in relation to the target areas identified as they all provided literacy and numeracy targets. Other identified areas were generally expressed and did not relate to specific curriculum learning areas. However the areas identified could be considered as being important in supporting the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum. One area that did come through the review more than others was ICT, though it was difficult to determine from the documentation what this actually meant. Various schools identified this as an area for student learning, staff development, administration or infrastructure. The documentation and analysis did not allow for any distinction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The schools whose documentation was accessible were all meeting the legal requirement to prioritise and identify targets for literacy and numeracy. What does not appear to be evident, however, is the provision of a curriculum that reflects all areas of the NZC, despite this being a requirement for schools to represent in their strategic planning, as outlined in NAG 2. Though these schools are all seen as having exemplary practice by ERO, there is a lack of documented evidence that the wider curriculum is being implemented within these schools based on this review. This raises an issue regarding the evidence and visibility of aspects of the wider curriculum in schools' key documentation and opportunities for students to engage with the complete curriculum in these schools.

It is assumed that judgments being made by ERO relating to schools of excellence are based on triangulated evidence seen within these schools and

classrooms. Such evidence would include observations that the implementation of the curriculum reflects the wider curriculum and that teachers are making decisions based on providing students with opportunities to experience all eight learning areas of the NZC. Though the findings of this study are based solely on schools' documentation and ERO review assessments, it does reflect a trend within schools documentation of a narrowing of the curriculum focus.

This narrowing of the curriculum has also been seen in the results obtained from the RAINS Project (Thrupp & White, 2013). This research project has identified three types of narrowing of the curriculum, with one being the "narrowing towards reading, writing and maths despite often wanting to still offer a broad primary curriculum" (2013, p. 19). Any narrowing of the NZC would be in tension with the original Ministry of Education intent of this national document where the breadth of the eight learning areas were intended as "a foundation for later specialisation" (2007, p. 16), and valued for the pathways they open to further learning. Further, this narrowing of the curriculum could be regarded as reducing opportunities for learners. Any such narrowing would not then be following the intent of the NZC which clearly identifies that schools "should ensure that each strand receives due emphasis" (p.38).

The results from this initial review of school documentation does raise some concerns in that the results reflect a growing movement for the curriculum to be focused on the National Standards and for other areas to be implemented as an add on. With this focus on NS then the message being conveyed subtly to the students and wider community is that these areas of the curriculum are of greater importance than other areas. It could be argued that this is the hidden curriculum being promulgated within our education system.

Further, these results raise some very critical questions about the curriculum in schools as these are schools reported as demonstrating exemplary practice. It should be expected that their documentation reflect the requirements as identified in the statutory requirements. If the sampled documents from these schools are truly representative of schools of excellence then we suggest that the National Standards have become the new curriculum, reflecting what Bolstad (2006) identified as the assessed curriculum. This assessed curriculum signals the areas in which schools are required to report the achievement of their students to their parents, community and in their annual report as identified in NAG 2A. Possibly, however, in spite of what the publicly available school documentation states, what is actually happening in classrooms is that teachers are making sensible curriculum decisions for their students, and this is what is being observed by ERO. If teachers are using their professional judgements in relation to what is being learnt in their classrooms, then arguably, teachers *are* meeting the intent of the NZC that "design should allow teachers scope to meet needs, interests and talents..." (p.37) of the students in their classrooms. However anecdotal information would suggest this is not happening and what is required is further investigation into actual classroom practice to see if the wider curriculum is evident in the day-to-day experiences being provided by teachers.

Therefore this is a cautionary tale that suggests educational leaders need to take notice of the current trends in focusing school targets on meeting the NS requirements at the exclusion of other learning areas. This trend may result in students not receiving the broad education that makes links within and across learning areas as identified within the NZC. Current school plans may

lead to a nation of literate and numerate students but what about our future artists, athletes, social scientists, historians and the like? Classroom teachers must be encouraged to bring these skills to the forefront in our changing world for the betterment of our society. Sir Ken Robinson (2009) talks about education being transformative, therefore it is not a standardised education we should be implementing within schools, but a personalised education which looks to build achievement through nurturing the individual talents of each child, thus creating an environment where students want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions. In order to achieve such an outcome we need to ensure that students have the opportunity to experience the wider curriculum so that their individual talents can be fostered.

NOTE: This article is based on a presentation given at the annual conference of the New Zealand Association of Research in Education (NZARE), Dunedin, 27 November, 2013.

REFERENCES

- Begg, A. (1998). Getting behind the curriculum: Teachers as curriculum developers. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 2, 7-11.
- Bolstad, R. (2006). Who should decide the curriculum? *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 1, 7-8.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27-40. doi:10.3316/QRJ0902027
- Bradley, L. (2004). *Curriculum leadership: Beyond boilerplate standards*. Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Education.
- Caldwell, B. (2010). National policy 'vision' curbs creativity. *West Australian*. Retrieved from <http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/-lwa/8617352/national-polcy-version-cyrbs-creativity>
- Education Review Office, (n.d). *Return times for school reviews*. Retrieved from <http://www.ero.govt.nz/Review-Process/Return-Times-for-School-Reviews>
- Lange, D. (1988). *Tomorrow's schools: The reform of education administration in New Zealand*. Wellington: Government Printer.
- Labuschagne, A. (2003). Qualitative research: Airy fairy or fundamental? *The Qualitative Report*, 8(1). Retrieved 13 March 2014, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR8-1/.html>
- McGee, C. (2012). Teachers and curriculum decisions. In C.McGee & D. Fraser. (eds.) *The professional practice of teaching* (4th ed., pp. 76-96). Albany, North Shore, NZ: Cengage Learning.
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum: For English-medium teaching and learning in years 1-13*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2008). *Te marautanga o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Education legislation*. Retrieved from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInNewZealand/EducationLegislation.aspx>
- Nelson, J. (2011, June/July). Transforming or conforming? *Teacher: The National Education Magazine*, 222, 13-16. Retrieved 14 April 2014 from <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=027218066432116;res=IELHSS>
- O'Neill, A. (2005). Shifting conceptions of curriculum and curriculum change. In P. Adams, K. Vossler & C. Scrivens (Eds.), *Teachers' work in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 115-126). Southbank, VIC, Australia: Thomson Dunmore Press.
- Robinson, K. (2009) *The element: How finding your passion changes everything*. New York, NY: Viking

- Thrupp, M. & White, M. (2013). *Research, Analysis and Insight into national Standards (RAINS) Project. Report commissioned by The New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa (NZEI)*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZEI.
- Tolley, A. (2009). *National standards information for schools*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ussher, B. (2001). *Assessment and physical education: A case study investigation of the discourses and mediations of curriculum making*. Unpublished masters thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Manuscript Submitted: May 20, 2015

Manuscript Accepted: June 1, 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ANTHONY FISHER
University of Waikato



Anthony has over 30 years experience within the education sector, ranging from teaching to principalship, educational psychologist and management at a national level. Currently he is a senior lecturer in Te Whiringa, School of Educational Leadership and Policy. His research interests include transitions between different educational contexts, leadership and coaching and mentoring. He is currently completing a PhD, which is looking at the relationship between teachers and principals and the impact of the principals position within a school's social network.

Contact: afish@waikato.ac.nz

BILL USSHER
University of Waikato



Bill is a senior lecturer in Te Hononga, School of Curriculum and Pedagogy. He is currently acting deputy Head of School. His research and teaching include areas of educational leadership, classroom assessment in primary schools and teaching practice experiences in initial teacher education.

Contact: bussher@waikato.ac.nz