

The New Zealand Curriculum

Update



In this issue:

02
The NLC evaluation

02
The case studies

04
Where to next?

Welcome to *The New Zealand Curriculum Update*

Curriculum Updates support school leaders and teachers as they work to design and review their school curriculum, in line with the New Zealand Curriculum and with current knowledge and understandings about effective classroom teaching.

Curriculum Updates are published in the *Education Gazette* and are available online at <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Ministry-curriculum-guides/Curriculum-updates>

This Update focuses on findings from the recent evaluation of the Network Learning Communities (NLC) initiative.



Network learning communities

The NLC initiative brings together educators to develop their understanding of the New Zealand Curriculum and support its implementation.

Each NLC group has its own sector leader. These leaders are supported by regional advisors. The initiative was first introduced in 2008, and by 2010, there were nearly 200 NLCs operating around New Zealand.

NLCs vary considerably in their composition, the way they operate, and the goals they set. Some are led by principals and focus on the development and implementation of local curricula. Others are led by middle managers and focus on learning areas and the demands of the curriculum. Although some are cross-sector, most

have either a primary or a secondary focus. Most have been built on existing relationships and networks and are often from the same geographical area.

NLC activities range from regular meetings of school principals to whole-staff professional development days, interschool visits, and conferences that include teachers, students, and other educators. In all NLCs, participants share practices, support each other, and work to develop strong collegial networks.

The NLC evaluation

An evaluation of the NLC initiative took place in terms 3 and 4 of 2010.

It used a range of data collection methods including a facilitated workshop, interviews, online surveys, and document analyses. Participants included regional advisors, sector leaders, and representatives from schools involved in a NLC.

The evaluation included ten case studies of NLCs. Data was gathered for these case studies by interviewing sector leaders and school representatives.



What does the evaluation tell us?

Overall, the evaluation shows a positive response from those who took part. They report that they valued the opportunity to network with colleagues, learn what others were doing, and support each other. This networking and collegiality was a key benefit mentioned by nearly all participants.

*[A key benefit has been ...]
"knowing where others are at and being able to gauge [your own] progress against that"
"being able to bounce ideas off other people"
"because the [NLC] is small, people feel they can ask questions and not feel stupid"
"being reinvigorated".*

NLC case study participants

Participants reported that their NLC had helped meet their school's curriculum needs to some extent (37 percent) or to a large extent (32 percent). They also reported that the NLC had had some influence on their knowledge of the curriculum and on the teaching and learning practices in their schools. Data showed increases in the knowledge and expertise of the participants during their time in the NLC, as well as changes to teaching and learning practices over the same period.

A variety of measures was used to assess the success of an NLC. However, most of the sector leaders reported that their NLC had been very successful in achieving its individual goals. Most wanted to see their NLC continued in some form. Arguably, networking has been the biggest area of success. The NLCs have

enabled school leaders from different schools to work together, to share practice, and in many instances, to develop new knowledge in professional learning groups.

*"[Being part of an NLC has] forced [me] to think about the curriculum ... to do something."
"Talking clarifies why you are doing what you are doing, and the commitment of sharing is a deadline for getting it done."*

NLC case study participants

The case studies

Each sector leader was asked what their case study would be called if it were a television programme or movie. Their response became

the title of that case study, reflecting what makes each NLC unique. As well as celebrating their successes, the case studies

are also honest discussions of the NLCs' challenges and frustrations. The experiences of two of these NLCs are described below.

› CASE STUDY

Dream Sleepers: *Wakening the Dream in Everyone*

This NLC, which included five primary school principals, was seen by the participants as a way of being reinvigorated or "wakening the dream", which they felt had been "lost in administrivia".

The case study illustrates how it is possible to facilitate professional learning conversations, which critique and challenge practice, early in the development of a learning community. The participants wanted to achieve results quickly. They did not believe they could afford to spend time on developing trust and shared understandings before moving on to other goals – the needs of their students were too immediate. As a result they formed an

"intentional group" – a group that works in a deliberate manner and goes beyond "superficial chit chat".

As a first step, the principals employed a facilitator to run a one-day meeting, at which they discussed what they wanted to achieve. The outcome was a team charter that articulated the group's purpose and outlined how participants would work together. Since then, the NLC has met once a term. Each of these meetings follows the same agenda. First, the participants explore a "puzzle of practice" – something that has happened (or is happening) that provides an opportunity for deep reflection and authentic learning. Then

they share successes and challenges since the last meeting. Finally, they discuss a professional reading provided by one of the group. This reading relates to the puzzle of practice from the previous meeting. Each member has a particular role, and the responsibilities are rotated.

The principals involved in the Dream Sleepers NLC noted a number of benefits, particularly in regard to increasing student voice in their schools. They also reported that they were more likely to engage in learning conversations, to reflect on their own practice, and to question their assumptions.

› CASE STUDY

The Honest Teacher:

True Confessions of a Language Teacher on the Path from Confusion to Clarity

Participants in this NLC believe that their involvement has deepened their understanding of the New Zealand Curriculum and its implications for them as language teachers in secondary schools. Their choice of name came from the feeling that they were putting the pieces of a puzzle together and finding a sense of direction. Originally the group felt there was a gap between the curriculum document and what it meant for classroom practice. They had questions about how to make the curriculum work for them and their students.

A point of interest about this NLC is its shared leadership model. The sector leader reported

that this allowed for significant professional and personal development for the three leaders.

The members of the NLC reported growing in confidence as a result of meeting and working together. They met seven times during 2010. For some of those meetings, they used external expertise to facilitate professional learning. This helped to answer their questions and gave them direction.

The NLC members also shared ideas, which others in the group then trialled in their own schools. In this way, they gained “extra things to put in [their] teaching tool boxes”. One teacher described how she had learned to co-create lesson plans with senior students.

After successfully doing this in her classes, she had shared the idea with other teachers at her school, and as a result she had seen increased buy-in and enjoyment by students. She believed that, without the NLC, she “would not have moved forward so quickly”.

“It’s been so rewarding and worthwhile. It has been something that has come out of the cluster that we did not expect ... the professional support we have been able to give is huge. I have been teaching for twenty-five years, but it has been a first for me to have that level of professional support. It is just brilliant, very special.”

Sector leader

The other case studies

The stories from the ten case studies will be available shortly on The New Zealand Curriculum Online. The following are brief summaries of the eight NLC cases not highlighted in this Update.

Country Calendar: Making It Work for Us — This NLC comprises eight small, rural primary schools. These principals have focused on developing and implementing local curricula that reflect their rural communities.

Scooby Doo: The Case of the Mysterious NLC — This group of literacy leaders come from eight secondary schools. The purpose of this NLC is to develop a wiki to support the teaching of literacy across the curriculum in their schools.

Coffee, Cake, and Twiducate — This NLC consists of principals from four sole-charge primary schools. Its goals are to provide a support network for the principals and to use digital technologies to minimise their students’ isolation.

Bridging Islands: A DIY Approach — This large cross-sector NLC comprises a secondary school and its nineteen contributing schools. Its purpose is to develop more effective, supportive, and coherent transitions to high school so that both students and teachers see year 9 as the next year of learning for students rather than the first year of college.

Family Ties: Doing It Together — This NLC is a group of ten primary schools, seven of which are also an Information and Communication Technologies professional development cluster. In 2010, the focus of the NLC was on making learning visible for their students and on building shared understandings about effective teaching and learning within ICT.

The Sky Is the Limit: A Learning Pathway — This cross-sector NLC consists of six primary schools, one intermediate, and the local high school. While initially involving the principals, the focus of the NLC is now on the deputy and associate principals as the schools look to implement improvements in their local school curricula.

The Trials and Tribulations of the Pataka Classroom — In this NLC, visual arts teachers from a core group of nine schools meet regularly in the Pataka art gallery. Up to twenty schools attend larger events. Their goals are to raise achievement for Māori and Pasifika students, extend senior students to excellence in scholarship, and build a community to support the New Zealand Curriculum.

What’s the Point? Meaningful Learning Through Curriculum — This is a secondary NLC. Its purpose is to allow schools that already have an integrated curriculum to share their experiences and to review and develop their practice.



“The NLC is about making the New Zealand Curriculum work for us.”

NLC case study participant

Where to next?

The evaluation raises two key questions about the nature of the NLCs.

First, to what extent are they learning communities? Currently the focus of most groups appears to be on providing professional support and sharing practices, ideas, and resources. There is not always the critique and challenge that epitomise learning communities. However, there are exceptions. These suggest it is possible to raise the bar and establish more formal, networked learning communities that focus on enhancing student outcomes through the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum.

Second, to what extent do participants view NLCs as learning hubs through which ideas and practice are critiqued and challenged? NLCs could be forums for the transfer of learning between communities and between initiatives, thus increasing the impact of other professional development. Although members reported that the greatest benefit of participation in their NLC was the opportunity to network, they appeared to be thinking of networking in a broad social sense and largely at an individual level. In most instances, there was little networking between NLCs or between learning communities within schools involved in the initiative. With a few exceptions, the NLCs are

groups within which networking occurs, but they are not networked communities beyond this level.

Based on the exceptions noted above, it is clearly possible to develop a more robust learning culture and to promote greater networking between communities. But to do this, NLC participants will need to engage at a level that is deeper than collegiality and

sharing practice. This will require more explicit accountability for making changes at a school level and for transfer of learning. The evaluation suggests that although most groups have recorded success in achieving their goals, some participants in the NLCs may have been reaching for “low hanging fruit”. Encouraging them to reach higher is the next challenge.

Guiding questions He pātai

- How can we work with neighbouring schools to deepen our knowledge of the New Zealand Curriculum and improve outcomes for our students?
- How do we ensure that the learning one person undertakes is shared with the wider professional community?
- How do we ensure that our professional learning is robust and the outcomes we are striving for are worthwhile?
- Do I have professional conversations with my colleagues in which we honestly critique and challenge our assumptions and practices?
- On a continuum with “professional group” at one end and “learning community” at the other, where does our professional learning currently fit? Why?
- How could we shift our professional learning more towards being a learning community?



Useful resources

➤ **The New Zealand Curriculum Online**

For information on professional learning and development to support implementation of the NZC and a list of regional advisors responsible for network learning communities, see: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/Support-for-schools>

➤ **Education Counts**

For evaluation reports on implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum see: www.educationcounts.govt.nz