

**Commentary for Ministry of Education Reference Group Meeting, 1-2 March, 2007
on Reports Analysing Submissions to *The New Zealand Curriculum Draft for
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Introduction

What struck me as I read the reports analysing the submissions on the draft curriculum was the emergence of themes restating timeless debates in curriculum – about curriculum as “entitlement” and “requirement”; about what should be added (and hardly ever taken away); between content and process, and content and outcomes; between prescription and flexibility. Given the intention, as expressed by the Minister of Education in his letter introducing the curriculum, to “offer teachers more opportunities to apply their professional knowledge ... (and to) allow them greater flexibility to develop new and innovative teaching approaches ...” I have chosen to organise my commentary on these debates around the theme of curriculum design and the support it offers for flexibility. I have selected this focus not only because of the Minister’s statement but also because the size of the document makes it immediately obvious that what has been attempted is the development of a smaller curriculum with substantially less detail than the current curriculum. I am interested in whether less offers more – at least as it is perceived by those who responded to the draft. The focus of the commentary is restricted to the overall curriculum structure rather than the individual Learning Areas.

The implications of a smaller, more flexible curriculum for curriculum design

The arguments for curriculum flexibility are compelling. Teachers are well-qualified professionals. Flexibility acknowledges their professional autonomy; it increases their sense of control and, therefore, commitment and satisfaction; and it enables responsiveness to local needs and interests. On the other hand, flexibility increases workload because it diminishes the value of, and market for, published resources; it presupposes expertise in curriculum that may not be widely or evenly spread; and it may compromise entitlement as schools and individual teachers make idiosyncratic choices about what to teach. For these reasons, effective provision of curriculum flexibility at the national level places significant pressure on curriculum design.

This is not to naively suggest that there is a linear relationship between design and implementation and that national policy can, or should, somehow be “teacher-proofed”. As Wenger (1998)¹ has argued:

Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning; it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design (p. 225).

This complexity does not, however, absolve the curriculum designer of all responsibility because, as Wenger subsequently argues, “recognizing that communities of practice will generate their own response to design does not imply that they must be left to their own devices” (p. 234). The goal, as Davis and Krajcik² (2005) explain, should be to produce a curriculum resource that communicates the essence of intention and that promotes teachers’ pedagogical design capacity so that they can “participate in the discourse and practice of teaching; rather than merely implementing a given set of curriculum materials” (p. 6). At the level of national curriculum policy, the successful communication of curriculum essence is particularly important because the normative nature of national curriculum cannot be ignored. As Hlebowitsh³ (2005) explains, design is critical because:

the school curriculum has some obligation to create experiences that will fulfil obligations tied to the public interest ...if we forsake the work of design, we essentially forsake our commitment to the normative experience of the school (p. 4)

In other words, design serves the important function of channeling school experience by selecting from the vast array of possibilities the communally prized knowledge and understandings that otherwise might not be developed (Hlebowitsh, 2005). Design, therefore, expresses intention and, as such, it matters what sense teachers make of it. It establishes a normative agenda from which teachers, for reasons of equity, are required to accept some direction, not in the sense of “scripting” action, but in the sense of “channeling, focusing and professionalizing teacher judgment” (p. 13). Just as these judgments can be evaluated against intention so the design itself can be evaluated for its efficacy in communicating its normative agenda. As Beeby⁴ (1970), a former Director of Education in New Zealand, was to observe in relation to the implementation of the secondary school curriculum in the 1950’s: “No change in practice, no change in the curriculum has any meaning unless the teacher *understands* [italics added] and accepts it. This is a simple but fundamental truth that no curriculum builder can ever forget” (Beeby, 1970, p. 46).

¹ Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

² Davis, E. & Krajcik, J. (2005). Designing Educative Curriculum Materials to Promote Teacher Learning. *Educational Researcher*, 34(3), 3-14.

³ Hlebowitsh, P. (2005). *Designing the School Curriculum*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

⁴ Beeby, C. (1970). Curriculum Planning. In G. Howson (Ed.), *Developing a New Curriculum*. London: Heinemann.

To what extent is the draft curriculum “understood”?

There is persuasive evidence within the submissions that teachers and schools strongly endorse the draft design for its clarity. It was found either “quite” or “very” easy to read and understand by 83% of respondents⁵. Significantly, from the point of view of providing direction for flexible implementation, the Vision and Principles were regarded as easy to understand by approximately 90% of respondents, and the new inclusions – Key Competencies (86%) and Values (86%) – were also well understood. The Vision and Principles were not just regarded as clear, they were also supported as “useful when designing a curriculum” (79% of respondents in each case). On the particular issue of flexibility there was strong support for the level of flexibility provided in the curriculum. 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the curriculum “will give each school the right amount of flexibility when designing a curriculum for its particular group of students”. Although the question is ambiguous and possibly meaningless⁶, 75% of respondents agreed that “the curriculum will inform the future direction of our school curriculum”.

These quantitatively supported conclusions are endorsed by evidence from the longer submissions⁷. The NZEI, for example, claimed that the draft “provides a blueprint for schools which is both liberating and challenging for teachers in developing authentic contexts and meeting learning needs” (p. 14). Likewise the PPTA welcomed clarification about the extent of school control over the curriculum “both by specifying that ‘each school will design and implement its own curriculum in ways that engage and motivate its particular students’(p. 26) and by providing guidance as to the issues schools should consider in doing this” (p. 15). Five other respondents valued the opportunity that the curriculum provides for schools to develop their own curriculum ideas (p. 34). The principles received endorsement from 9 respondents as being “realistic/achievable/give direction/greater clarity/succinct/less prescriptive/more flexible” (p. 47)

From a design perspective the draft was regarded as “easy to read and layout easy to access”(p. 30), and the use of the colour, foldouts and diagrams was regarded as helpful by some respondents.

Impediments to understanding

Given this strong endorsement of the draft’s ease of understanding, usefulness and provision of flexibility it seems churlish to challenge the curriculum on these grounds. There is evidence, however, within the submissions that suggests it would be a mistake to take high percentage responses at face value. The challenges within the submissions fall into 5 categories – consistent patterns of disagreement within the quantitative data;

⁵ These data are drawn from the Colmar Brunton report – for clarity of reading the page references for each data set have been omitted.

⁶ In the sense that *any* national curriculum will inevitably inform school curriculum.

⁷ Lift Education reports.

evidence of concerns within the quantitative data itself; stated concerns about the quality of design; stated concerns about the level of flexibility in the document; stated concerns about omissions.

Consistent patterns of disagreement within the data

A first hint of possible concerns about the clarity and usefulness of the draft is evident in the comparative responses of primary and secondary schools. Whereas 90% of primary schools found the draft easy to understand, only 74% of secondary schools felt likewise. Only 32% of secondary respondents (compared with 55% of primary) agreed or strongly agreed that the “direction for learning set out in this document is just what students need” (p. 14). A much smaller proportion of secondary respondents (58% cf. 83%) agreed or strongly agreed that the document was providing the right amount of flexibility (p. 13). While the extent of these differences is not great, they are consistent enough to give pause for thought about design – is there something in the design that is leading secondary respondents to be less enthusiastic in endorsing its clarity, usefulness and flexibility? Some may argue that it is not curriculum design that is at fault but the perceptions of the respondents. From a policy point of view this position, even if it could be sustained, is unhelpful. As Hayward et al.⁸ (2004) have argued, external agencies have limited control over contextual factors that influence the understanding and acceptance of reform. They have to boost, therefore, the strength of the factors that are in their control. What is “in control” here is curriculum design. It is evident from the reported comments associated with the questionnaire responses summarised above that more secondary than primary respondents (13% cf. 6%) found the draft “too vague/too broad/lacking in detail/inconsistent/ambiguous-difficult to interpret”(p. 18).

Concerns evident within the quantitative data

As well as asking respondents about the general value of the draft and its components, the questionnaire also asked about implementation challenges. Overall, 39% of respondents thought that the draft posed “major” implementation challenges (again the differences between primary and secondary school persist with almost half – 45% - of secondary respondents viewing the challenges as major compared with 35% of primary respondents). The main challenges that respondents foresaw were resource provision (20%), time (17%) and increased workload (11%). These are significant findings because they are telling us that implementation is problematic without significant resourcing, time and training. If the document was as clear and useful as the generalised responses suggest it is difficult to see why implementation would be so problematic – especially given that 78% of respondents thought that the curriculum affirmed the “educational direction that our school is taking” (p. 11). It is perhaps significant to note in this regard that respondents generally found the section on designing a school-based curriculum to be the least useful (p. 27).

⁸ Hayward, L, Priestley, M. & Young, M. (2004). Ruffling the calm of the ocean floor: merging practice, policy and research in assessment in Scotland. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(3), 397-415

Stated concerns about the quality of design

Curriculum design has an inherent level of complexity arising from the expression of multiple and related elements: in this case, vision, principles, values, key competencies, learning areas, and pedagogy (not to mention the elements within each of the learning areas).

This complexity is enhanced by flexibility because choice increases decision-making possibilities. If decisions are to align with curriculum intention then flexibility adds pressure to the process of making sense of the curriculum because teachers and schools not only have to make sense of simultaneously interacting elements *within* the curriculum but they also have to integrate these with existing resources from *beyond* the curriculum that may or may not be well-aligned to the curriculum intention.

There are barriers within the draft to this complex process of integrating curriculum elements.

Use of language

Some respondents comment on the complicated language and use of jargon (p. 32) and the inconsistent use of terms within the document (p. 32). Respondents to the section on The Arts question the omission of the sub-heading “Why Study Arts?” when such a heading is included in all other Learning Areas. “Key competencies” (managing self, relating to others, participating and contributing, thinking, using language, symbols and texts) are introduced on p11 but a completely different classification of “competencies” (confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners) is introduced on p8. While these oversights and contradictions may seem minor they unnecessarily increase the cognitive load for those who have to interpret and implement the curriculum.

Layout

Integration is also not strongly assisted by the layout. It is stated on page 7 that “while this document focuses on these elements one at a time, they are parts of a whole”. In no other place within the document is the integration of elements specifically addressed. The format – one separate page at a time – implies separation, and even the diagram on page 7 that aims to show connections it omits reference to pedagogy, and does not name the learning areas.

Number of elements

Integration of elements is further compounded by the section on Designing a School Curriculum (pp26-33) where it might be expected that suggestions for integrating the aforementioned curriculum elements would be offered. Instead a *further* set of considerations are put before teachers and schools – “significant themes” (p 26), Schooling Strategy goal (p 27), National Education Guidelines (p 27), a “focus on outcomes” (p 26), and “purposeful assessment” (p 26). In other words, the possibilities, and therefore the complexities, increase. The addition of “themes” in particular seems to

have added an element that some respondents find confusing, especially their relationship to the Vision, Principles, Values and Key Competencies (p. 109).

Contradictory elements

At a more substantive level respondents also express concern about coherence of approach to curriculum design. In an interesting juxtaposition of viewpoints the comments of the Education Forum and the PPTA both express concern about persistence of an outcomes focus (p. 11, Lift Education). Other respondents comment on the “lack of a coherent message about curriculum approaches and priorities” (p. 11) and the omission of an underpinning rationale (p. 15). The mix of curriculum approaches is most evident in the organisation of Learning Areas by outcome (achievement objectives at different levels) alongside the inclusion of key competencies organised with a process-focus (not defined by level), or as the Draft states it, as a “framework for designing learning environments and experiences” (p. 29). If, as stated elsewhere in the draft, “a focus on outcomes provides clarity for curriculum design” (p. 28) it is difficult to understand why the Key Competencies and the Learning Areas are treated differently. The point here is not so much whether curriculum should be organised according to an outcomes or process focus but rather that the inclusion of both within the draft creates confusion. As Kelly (1999)⁹ has commented:

To offer educational and curricular prescriptions which do not clarify which of these two approaches they are recommending, or which, worse...offer a mishmash of the two, is to do the opposite of ‘contributing to the search for greater clarity and definition’ in relation to the curriculum debate and, more seriously to deny teachers the advantages of clear advice and a conceptually sound base for the realities of their practice. Teaching is of itself a complex activity, so that teachers should be excused the added complexities of having to cope with incoherent sets of guidelines.” (Kelly, 1999, 82).

Burton et al. (2001)¹⁰ draw a similar conclusion. While noting that different curriculum approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive they conclude that “the more influences that the curriculum has been encouraged to satisfy the more complicated (or possibly even confused) the vision will be” (p. 21).

Stated concerns about the level of flexibility in the document

In spite of the fact that some respondents supported the flexibility provisions within the draft these same respondents, and others, also expressed caution. Some respondents perceive a tension between the mandated curriculum and schools freedom to design and implement their own curriculum (p. 110). Others (p. 12) see the potential for increased flexibility to undermine national provision (and entitlement). While the NZEI and PPTA both express support for flexibility, their support is qualified. For the NZEI flexible provision has the capacity to “further exacerbate undesirable school differences” and they urge a balance to be struck “between prescription and freedom to ensure safeguards and

⁹ Kelly, A. (1999). *The Curriculum: Theory and Practice*. (4th ed.). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

¹⁰ Burton, N., Middlewood, D. & Blatchford, R. (2001). Models of Curriculum Organisation. In D Middlewood & N. Burton (eds.) *Managing the Curriculum*. (pp18-34) London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

guarantees for all students, while allowing schools to determine their own curriculum according to the needs of their students”. The PPTA seek a clearer statement in the curriculum about the entitlement expressed in NAG1.

There is a particular tension between the statements about flexibility in the section on Designing a School Curriculum (“schools have considerable freedom” p. 26) and the statement on page 13 that the Learning Areas as “essential for a general education” (p. 13). The organisation of achievement objectives by Learning Area appears to endorse their essential nature but the Learning Areas are then notably absent in the planning considerations (p. 26) in the section on Designing a School Curriculum section. Where they do appear in this section they are given little emphasis. For example, the only reference to the Learning Areas in the section on Planning with a Focus on Outcomes (given the achievement objectives, an area where you expect some explicit direction) is a single sentence at the start which states: “Note that the vision, values, and principles are embedded in the key competencies, the learning areas and the daily life of the school” (p. 28). The section on Planning Coherent Pathways (p. 32-33) mentions only some of the Learning Areas.

There are other tensions in the draft between flexibility and prescription because embedded within the apparent flexibility is a considerable amount of direction:

- the “essential” nature of the eight Learning Areas – see above
- students “*need to be challenged* to develop their (key) competencies” (p11)
- the values “*should be evident* in ...curriculum...” (p10)
- the principles “*should guide* each school as it designs and implements its own curriculum” (p 9)
- the vision claims that “our young people *will be...*” (p. 8).

Flexibility, therefore, is cloaked in direction (and possibly, therefore, future regulation). While direction is appropriate in a national curriculum, direction combined with flexibility, adds to complexity because it is saying to teachers and schools that you have options about designing your own curriculum but you must include within it the elements set out in the document. Omission of elements is not an option and check listing is not an option either because of the risks of glossing over critical curriculum elements.

It is perhaps these factors that help to explain the implementation difficulties anticipated by the questionnaire respondents and reinforced by the a large number of respondents (31) in the long submissions who argue that implementation needs to be supported by professional development and by second-tier documents, including exemplars (p. 37). It is a concern that a simpler, clearer document aimed at increasing teacher flexibility should draw so many responses suggesting that further levels of interpretation are required. The curriculum needs to be much clearer about the relationships between the curriculum elements and their *relative* importance. The use of clear diagrams within the document and of clearer statements about integrating elements within the section on Designing a School Curriculum (pp26-33) would help in this regard. It is not a

satisfactory default option to rely on subsequent professional development. The document itself must do as much of this difficult work as possible to help teachers and schools understand its expectations and intentions.

Stated concerns about omissions

The submissions about omissions are those that offer the greatest challenge to curriculum design. In essence, what each of these submissions is saying is that the curriculum needs to be *more* prescriptive. Admittedly each individual respondent is not suggesting substantial additions but the cumulative impact of multiple submissions in this area is overwhelming. Respondents variously want greater prescription in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi (the omission that occasioned the most separate responses) and in relation to concepts such as sustainability and spirituality. Many submissions also suggested additions to the Principles (p. 47), Values (p. 51), and Key Competencies (p. 55). Within the Learning Areas additional content was also suggested. Aside from some concern about references to economic growth (p. 41-2) there were few suggestions for deletion.

This pressure to add is a common curriculum challenge. If the challenge is addressed by addition, coverage is increased, and depth and flexibility are reduced. On the other hand, many of the submissions raise legitimate concerns about omission that if not addressed significantly limit entitlement. The difficult curriculum question is not, therefore, the *importance* question – what do students need to learn? - but the *relative importance* question - of all that students could learn that might be important what learning matters most? There are clearly components that must be added but there needs to be considerable caution exercised about adding to reflect *every* voice.

Conclusions

At the general level the draft has garnered considerable support and it is probably fair to conclude that a smaller curriculum has received strong endorsement. What is less clear, however, is whether its design achieves its aspirations. In spite of the general perception of ease of use it comprises multiple and complex elements that interact with each other; there are some internal contradictions of language and form; and there are omissions that have to be addressed without adding to coverage in ways that substantially reduce (valued) flexibility and depth.

On the basis of my reading of these submissions from the perspective of curriculum design and flexibility I recommend:

1. The connections between the internal elements of the curriculum are made more transparent in written text and through supporting visuals
2. Those elements of the curriculum that represent entitlement are stated as such and that, as a consequence, the scope of flexibility is defined. Given the space in the curriculum devoted to the Learning Areas (60% of the document - 34 of 57 pages including the fold out pages at the end) a statement of requirement about the content of these areas might be one place to start. A considerable amount of work has been devoted to trying to capture the “essence” of the Learning Areas and to

- refine the achievement objectives. It might not be unreasonable, therefore, for schools to be required to meet particular expectations in relation to these areas¹¹.
3. The section on Designing a School Curriculum is written to connect more transparently with the preceding curriculum elements and avoids introducing new elements.
 4. The language is checked for internal consistency.

In making these recommendations I acknowledge that I am in a privileged position because I am, in a way that the Ministry of Education never can be, relatively insulated from the consequences of my opinions. Curriculum development at the national level is an inevitably complex and contentious process. It is relatively easy, as I have done here, to raise a critical voice. It is much more difficult to mediate the tensions and to make the hard, and final, decisions about direction and inclusion.

¹¹ In making this comment I am not suggesting that the Learning Areas and achievement objectives need to be accepted uncritically – simply that their dominance in the draft (and historically), if it persists into the final document, warrants comment about expectation.