

## RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM DOCUMENT 2006.

From South Auckland Association Teachers of English (SAATE).  
Alan Papprell. Chair.

### Overall Commentary:

At first glance this document appears to be a straightforward statement of expected outcomes based on a commonly held philosophy of education that has underpinned the N.Z. curriculum since Peter Fraser's dictum of the 1940s and, more fully stated, in the Curry Report of 1962 and as developed in the 1994 – 2000 curriculum framework documents currently in use in N.Z. schools.

The draft document is commendable in that it acknowledges the changing face of N.Z. schools with a wider and more diverse ethnic and cultural population and thus reflects the ongoing review and flexibility that has been a feature of curriculum planning at school level for some years.

The inclusion of the aspirational abstract values and competencies as statements of intent is also commendable. However, if these are to be taught and then measured as quantifiable inputs and demonstrable outcomes concerns and criticisms will emerge especially if there is a push to "honour" them with a lesson plan rubric along the lines of:

Key Competency: Managing Self:

Students will, in the process of instruction:

- Meet deadlines, complete homework tasks and develop a timetable for work stream planning.
- Read and engage with the texts studied.
- Develop skills of self analysis and evaluation based on the feedback / feed forward given from contributed assessed work.

While such rubrics may acknowledge the intent of the draft curriculum one wonders if they will serve a real purpose in terms of over all comprehension and understanding of the content of the subject being studied.

The document provides commentary on the use of language, symbols and texts which clarifies the teacher understanding of the terms used across subject curricula but then introduces a somewhat "cute" definition of mathematics as a language (page 12). To most people the term language means "a method of human communication either spoken or written, consisting of *the use of words*." To define a subject that uses numerals and computation symbols as a language serves to confuse educational debate and public comprehension at a time when the demand for clarity of expression and understanding of the curriculum is regarded as crucial.

The re-enforcement, in the concluding paragraph (p12) that English language is the medium for most learning in the N.Z. Curriculum is to be commended particularly as this

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re-enforces the need for all students and teachers to be literate in the commonly accepted language of instruction and mass communication nationally and internationally.

The sections of the document devoted to pedagogy, curriculum design and planning are clearly expressed and reflect the processes that have been of long standing in the classroom and are now being supported by published research papers.

However, there are concerns about terminology in the curriculum design section. Here the statement offers a sociological view of the local curriculum / programme developments that will probably act as a “push-pull” factor in directing subject programmes into apparent “social relevance” thematic structures that develop courses of study that direct readings of texts for “social relevance”, “social applicability” on a purely functional level. One wonders whether such an approach will prove to be educationally sustainable in building coherent long-term school based curricula as envisaged in the document (p 26).

Again, the statement seeks to redefine and / or extend the meanings of education terminology by defining “critical literacy” as “critical literacies” in response to lobbying by interest groups like “The Enterprise N.Z. Trust” (Sunday Star Times 10/9/06) which has defined economics and personal finance as a literacy. Surely the curriculum statement would hold that “financial literacy” means “financial competency or the ability to manage ones money”? This is not the understanding of literacy held by teachers or the wider community who would hold that literacy is the ability to read and write and that “critical literacy” is a sophisticated extension of that fundamental skill.

The Education definition of critical literacy is:

- The involvement in analysis and critique of the relationships among text, language, power, social groups and social practices.
- A means of looking at written, spoken, visual, multimedia and performance texts to question and challenge the attitudes, values and beliefs of society.
- Examining the meaning within texts, considering the purpose of the text and the composer’s motives.
- Understanding that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views, silence other points of view and influence people’s ideas.
- Questioning and challenging the ways in which texts have been constructed.
- Analysing the power of language in society.
- Emphasising the multiple readings of texts, taking positions and stances on issues.
- Clarifying and considering attitudes and values and providing opportunity for social action.

(Tasmanian Ministry of Education – Critical literacy).

The reference to “critical literacy” in the draft curriculum document is couched in mechanistic socio-economic terms that, given the lobbying of the E.N.Z.T., is to be seen as being purely functional and focussed on personal budgeting and savings programmes as inputs into the national economy.

If there is a concern about individual finances and budgeting ability then, rather than creating a new definition of critical literacy, it would have been more relevant to include this concern in a relevant specific learning area such as social sciences or mathematics.

The document (p28) emphasises a focus on outcomes for clarity of design and discusses “prioritising” outcomes as a guide when developing programmes of instruction. This restates what teachers have done and continue to do in developing their programmes for years. However, there is a concern that an outcomes concentrated focus will dictate a climate that insists on having quantifiable and measurable outcomes from each unit of work or programme that will dictate a totally assessment driven course which may or may not be educationally sound and which may, especially if the assessment is focussed on some of the more abstract competencies, values and aspirations of the curriculum prove to be non-measurable or assessable. Such a situation has already emerged in the USA where the “No Child Left Behind” programme has dictated an assessment driven structure that has forced “teaching to the test” rather than inculcating an involvement in active learning with constructive educational outcomes. (NASSP website reports.)

The Draft Curriculum document discusses assessment and indicates that assessment evidence is “of the moment” and then fails to define the phrase. If the term is to mean that the assessment result is a “snapshot” of the student’s response to an assessment task on a particular day and at a particular time then the term is meaningless in the context of the curriculum statement for the paragraph heading indicates that assessment is an ongoing process that accretes data that can be analysed to indicate how and where a student is making or not making progress.

The concern over assessment appears again (p31.) in the statement: “Not all aspects of the curriculum need to be formally assessed, however. *Schools should take care to avoid excessive high stakes assessment in years 11-13.*” In the absence of a commonly acceptable definition of “excessive” what is meant here? Do schools create courses that provide for minimal accepted credit gain (80 credits with 8 from English and 8 from Mathematics at Level 1) so that students are not over taxed in their course of study or are schools top define their individual accepted minimal achievement credit structures and then argue the meaning of “excessive.” Whichever way it goes the credit valued courses built around Achievement Standards appear to dictate a series of inescapable high stakes assessment throughout the school year requiring the students to complete courses that each generate a specified number of credits. The comment made in the Curriculum document appears to invite schools to water down “difficult” subjects to allow students to gain the minimum number of credits necessary to be deemed to have gained NCEA level 1 or 2. Already some schools have put pressure on English and Mathematics to provide “minimal high stakes assessment” in order to maximise the number of students seen as attaining NCEA Levels 1 and 2. Such pressure will only increase with the publication of the statement “avoid excessive high stakes assessment in years 11-13” in the Curriculum Document.

These concerns aside the overall tenor of the curriculum document appears to be coherent and acceptable to the teacher and administrator although to be completely

comfortable the redefinition of terminology to suit the interests of particular lobby groups (mathematics as a language and critical literacy to mean “budgeting and money management) need to be considered.

### **Response to the ENGLISH curriculum outline:**

The English Essence statement is a coherent and concise expression of the intent of an English programme nationally and locally. It adequately summarises the principles and structures that were expressed in the 1994 **English in the New Zealand Curriculum** Document and should be making it clear that English, as a subject, is more than a basic literacy skill. That it expects the students to engage with the texts and language at a progressively higher level as they move through the school system.

However the distinction of level of difficulty expected from the texts is not clearly defined in the descriptors for the levels 1 through 8 which will allow the argument that a student could be operating a “level 6 critically evaluating a text” while reading a text that is easily recognisable as a level 2-3 one at all levels of the curriculum. It was this lack of clarity of definition that created confusion in the development of programmes from the initial curriculum documents.

There is a distinct sub-text within the Essence Statement that assumes the subject – English to be a functional subject that imparts basic literacy skills without directing or indicating a need for the subject to address the deeper critical and creative aspects of English both linguistically and literary.

While the 1994 Document emphasised the need to develop and foster critical literacy in the students the 2006 Draft document has fudged the importance of this skill preferring to talk of “using skills to engage with tasks and texts that are increasingly sophisticated and challenging, and doing so in increasing depth.” While this statement might be more easily understood by a lay reader its use invites teachers and students to a less intensive examination of the texts than would occur if the reference was more directly addressed to critical literacy. (However, the subversion of the term on p26 to mean financial / economically crucial may explain this silence in the essence statement.)

It is good to see that the Draft Curriculum stresses the importance of English as the medium of instruction across the learning areas and that the curriculum stresses the importance of literature written or translated into English as a means of encouraging students to examine their place in the world.

It would be useful if the essence statement for the subject – English did state that the subject has two main emphases: the study of language ( which involves learning to read, reading to learn, exploring how texts work and their intended effects, plus using language for a range of purposes and in a range of media ) and the study of literature ( in its widest sense – written, visual and oral texts ). This would serve to emphasise that English is more than just a functional tool in a strictly socio-economic sense and is, in reality, a very rich and multi-faceted subject central to how students think, learn and apply the skills to

other contexts and content areas. (The stress on creativity that is central to the Arts essence statement is a worthwhile link to make in this discussion.)

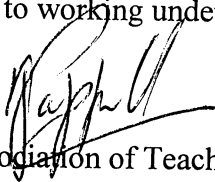
The presentation of the Achievement objectives by Learning Area as a series of fold out sheets left a lot to be desired as the presentation limited the ability to follow the continuum of development the writers envisaged. The only way one could easily follow the presentation was to photocopy off the relevant pages and place them in sequence. It would have been more useful to have provided the format set out by levels within Learning Areas as well instead of mentioning (p 34) that such a format was available.

The refined levels of achievement in the more logical strands *Listening, Reading & Viewing* and *Speaking, Writing & Presenting* are easier to follow than that presented in the 1994 document which will mean that teachers will find their planning and development of lessons easier to structure and thus address the objectives outlined in the curriculum statement.

Debate will, however, emerge as teachers grapple with the finer nuances of meaning in the adjectives and adverbs that demonstrate the academic progression that distinguish each level of achievement from the next. One would expect that the provision of exemplars or the refinement of the existing exemplars will serve to make the distinctions clearer to teachers, parents and students.

Putting the concerns expressed aside the draft curriculum statement is a commendable synthesis and refinement of the theories, practises and understandings of the 1994 English Curriculum Statement which should make it easier for teachers, administrators and students to come to working understanding of the nature of the subject – English.

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SAATE represents the teachers of English within the South Auckland – Counties-Manukau area and is affiliated to the New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English (NZATE).

The opinions expressed in this representation have been discussed and circulated among the teachers of English within the region.