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Classroom Controversy

by Rebecca Macfie

The new national curriculum introduces lofty aims of ensuring children learn how to think rather than to store up facts. But will it make them any better educated?

Here's a vexing question for the start of the school year. Will the new national curriculum result in: a) smart, adaptable, competent youngsters primed to cope with a fast-changing 21st century, or b) a generation of kids who know how to work the latest technology, but have precious little general knowledge?

The correct answer, of course, is that it all depends on whom you choose to believe. Here's Judy Hanna, principal of Mangere Bridge School and immediate past president of the primary-based Principals' Federation: "We're living in a different world this century. For children who start school today, the jobs for them have not been invented in many cases. I have a granddaughter – she's only two and a half – and I would be really happy for her to go to any school in New Zealand that is teaching this new curriculum, because it's going to equip her for the world she's going to live in, not the world I lived in."

Hanna, who was on the national reference group that oversaw the development of the new curriculum, says there are educators in the UK looking to New Zealand's latest round of reform and saying, "Oh, if only we could have this, what wonderful things we could do."

Now listen to Roger Moses, headmaster of Wellington College. He argues that the new curriculum, like its predecessor, is founded on a suite of false assumptions – that process matters more than content, that transferable skills matter more than knowledge. "Our youngsters of today are in extreme danger of being almost emasculated from the roots of their culture, and I don't know that this particular [curriculum] goes a long way to helping that ... Knowledge is being debased, and seen

as less and less relevant.”

Moses, a member of the Education Forum lobby group, says the new document reveals yet again how susceptible our school system is to the latest educational theory. Remember Donald Graves and process writing, anyone?

Parents ought not to feel bad if they don't have a clue what Hanna and Moses are on about. The launch of the curriculum late last year could easily have escaped notice amid the pre-Christmas frenzy. And, with its long list of eye-glazing imperatives – schooling will have “future focus”, kids will “learn how to learn”, they'll be empowered, enterprising, connected, creators of knowledge, who are positive in their own identities, etc, etc, etc – there's a fair chance that, for most, it slipped by in a fog of irrelevance.

Except that it's anything but irrelevant. The New Zealand Curriculum 2007 – a slender 44 pages, plus nifty fold-out Achievement Objectives – mandates what, and how, kids will learn at school from its implementation in two years' time.

The last curriculum framework had been in service barely a decade before it was subjected to a “stock take” and the long, slow, labour-intensive (15,000 people were involved, according to official estimates) process of forging a replacement began.

The previous 1993 curriculum had marked a new direction for New Zealand schools, away from a focus on content and activities to one based on “outcomes”. The old syllabus documents were thrown out and replaced with voluminous subject-based curriculum statements. Student progress was measured in “levels” (a kid in Year 6, for instance, might be anything from the top end of Level 2 to the bottom end of Level 5), subjects were carved up into “strands”, and learning was ticked off against hundreds of “achievement objectives” that spelt out what students were expected to be able to do. Periodically, the Education Review Office (ERO) would check up on schools – with particular emphasis, until the government ordered it to retract its teeth in the early part of this century, on compliance with the achievement objectives.

It all promised a brave new world where students would become “independent and lifelong learners” and schools would have flexibility to “design programmes which are appropriate to the learning needs of their students”, according to a 1993 paper by David Philips, of the Ministry of Education's research division.

Instead, many teachers felt tied up in knots by the requirement to deliver on endless achievement objectives. Complaints from stressed teachers struggling to deliver an

overcrowded curriculum became commonplace. Says Lester Flockton, emeritus director of Otago University's Education Assessment Research Unit (EARU), it was a curriculum "a mile wide and an inch deep".

So, does the new document bury this unhappy phase in New Zealand's educational history? Not really – but it introduces some important refinements. For starters, it's much shorter. Core academic subject requirements are boiled down to brief summaries of one or two pages. Among the expectations in science, for instance, is that schools will teach about the "composition and properties of matter, the changes it undergoes, and the energy involved"; maths must include "recognising and using the properties and symmetries of shapes and describing position and movement".

The much-loathed achievement objectives are still there, but there are fewer of them, and teachers are given permission to pick and choose the ones that suit their programmes and students.

Schools won't have to religiously cover the whole curriculum – they can do less, but in more depth, depending on where their students are at.

An important new requirement is that kids must develop attributes known as "key competencies" – how to think (including, somewhat ambitiously, how to "create knowledge"), how to use language, symbols and texts, how to manage themselves (thereby becoming "enterprising, resourceful, reliable and resilient"), how to relate to others, how to participate and contribute.

All this will be underpinned by a smorgasbord of values that schools must impart: excellence, innovation, inquiry, diversity, equity, community, ecological sustainability and integrity. Just how schools are to interpret these values and how anyone will know whether they are being delivered remain to be seen.

Mary Chamberlain, group manager of curriculum teaching and learning with the Ministry of Education, says the new document sets the outcomes that are "too important to be left to chance": kids must come out as confident, lifelong learners (sound familiar?), they will be literate and numerate and they will have understanding of key content as laid out in the brief subject outlines.

Teachers and principals will interpret these broad requirements via their own "school curriculum", tailored to the needs of their students.

Nowhere in this document is it stipulated whether, or when, kids will learn, say, the

periodic table, or Pythagoras' theorem, or the difference between a haiku and a sonnet.

Chamberlain suggests it's implicit in the subject outlines that they will learn such core content, but, more crucially, they'll understand the relevance of it. "Why is it important [a student] learns the periodic table? What's he going to do with it, how is he going to connect that? That's the important thing to know, rather than teaching little bits of things. It's actually knowing the disciplines of the subject."

Kevin Donnelly sums all this up in a couple of words: dumbed down.

Donnelly, executive director of Melbourne consultants Education Strategies, was hired by the Education Forum to write a submission on the new curriculum when it was issued in draft in 2006. He's been arguing for years that New Zealand is following a flawed model by abandoning detailed syllabus documents in favour of a broad, generic curriculum that denies teachers a clear "road map" of content.

Outcomes-based education, which gives precedence to "generic skills and competencies, like thinking, working in teams, being future-oriented, instead of teaching the type of essential knowledge and understanding associated with traditional subjects like history, geography, mathematics and literature", has been adopted by only a handful of countries and there's little evidence as to its effectiveness, he says.

"The more successful countries have a clear expectation that certain things will be taught at a certain year level, and they generally have a strong testing and assessment regime where there are consequences for not learning it. For instance, in Singapore, kids are streamed ... and kids are failed – four out of 10 is a failure.

"The New Zealand [approach] is based on the assumption that the student is the centre of the curriculum. In Australia, we are moving away from that and saying, 'Hold on, we need to teach them something.'"

For all the verbiage about the pace of technological change and the explosion in new knowledge, Donnelly and Moses argue that much of the important stuff remains the same. "No matter how many years have passed since Pythagoras' Theorem or the theorems related to Euclidean geometry were first set down, they are still as relevant now as when first discovered," wrote Donnelly in his submission.

Moses: "We need to stand back and say, 'What are the things that have actually stood the test of time? Why is Shakespeare still important? What does *Othello* say to us

about the human condition and the nature of jealousy? What does *Macbeth* say about the nature of power? Why do these things still speak to me today?’

“What we are seeing in this new curriculum is simply a continuation of the previous curriculum, and if you stand right back and ask, ‘What is it about the drift of curriculum development over the last 20 years?’, then my concerns are that the importance of knowledge per se is not given the same emphasis that it used to have. There is still a body of knowledge that an educated youngster should have ... We can become so focused on teaching computer skills and all the rest of it that we can end up producing kids who know a great deal about the immediate but not too much about the past.”

Moses says Chamberlain “let the cat out of the bag” in a newspaper story last year in which she was quoted saying, “There’s no use [students] being little knowledge banks walking around on legs. We’ve got computers, we don’t need people walking around with them in their heads.”

That quote has been widely used by critics of the new curriculum to lampoon Chamberlain and deride the document.

But Chamberlain she says she was misrepresented in the newspaper story, and the implication that the new curriculum diminishes the importance of core subject content because kids can simply Google the facts they need is wrong.

“Of course kids have to know facts, they have to know concepts and they have to know big ideas. But it’s not good enough just to know basic facts. They have to be able to do something with them. Take the example of kids learning about keeping pets – they are not only learning basic facts, but they are learning how useful they are and what they can do with them. That’s more motivating, more engaging, and it’s setting kids up for the real world. You don’t have kids in real life and in employment situations sitting by themselves, not talking to anyone else, writing down everything they know on a piece of paper. Employers don’t want that. They want people who can use what they know, with other people, to do something good or something different.”

Moses: “But where are those basic facts stipulated in the new curriculum? That’s my point.”

It’s not just the Education Forum and its supporters who worry about the direction taken with this curriculum and its predecessor. The secondary teachers’ union, the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), expressed deep ambivalence in its

submission: “The current emphasis on outcomes-based education ... is a paradigm shift that has gone too far. There is still a need for the education system to recognise that the processes of teaching and learning are critical to the success of students,” it said. “It leaves a gap in the middle ... where schools are left to work out how to make the pre-specified outcomes happen.”

PPTA president Robin Duff now says the “diffidence” expressed in that submission was a reflection of teacher nervousness after years of criticism of the NCEA and curriculum change. He’s not about to bash the document now that it’s finalised. “It was teachers, including the PPTA, who set out for this change, so we can hardly go back now and say it was all a terrible mistake, and I don’t believe it is.”

One might think, listening to this debate, that there was once some golden era when teachers up and down the country sang from the same detailed song sheet. Not so, says Margaret Austin, a former secondary school science teacher, Labour Party spokesperson on education and now a member of the Royal Society council.

Austin – who says the Royal Society is very happy with the new curriculum, bar a quibble with the list of values – recalls that in her teaching years she was free to draw on a wide range of resources. Similarly Flockton, a former teacher and primary school principal, says the old syllabus documents served as loose guidelines rather than tight prescriptions.

He fondly recalls having the liberty to embark on a two-year study of a local estuary with his students, in which they used simple experiments to make important findings about the level and cause of pollution. “It was actually very good science, and they were developing the disposition of a scientific mind in a localised way. But if you tried to say that all schools should study an estuary, it wouldn’t work.”

Flockton – who also served on the national reference group and is a strong advocate for the new curriculum – hopes it will free teachers up to “find greater depth and satisfaction” in the programmes they design, rather than skipping over a broad array of curriculum areas.

As Moses acknowledges, there’s a danger in polarising this debate. He knows as well as anyone that nothing is black and white when it comes to education. Although he worries that Shakespeare’s universal truths are being lost to today’s youth, plenty of parents of the current generation of schoolchildren – this writer included – have seen their kids enthralled by the Bard in a way that seldom happened in their own

school days, thanks to inspiring teachers who enjoy Shakespeare.

But therein lies an important point – the new curriculum hands huge discretion about what gets taught over to individual schools and teachers. Some might do Shakespeare, some might not. Some might make a local environmental feature a major focus of work. Some, in the interests of meeting the curriculum’s emphasis on “sustainability”, might do a whole swathe of work on global warming.

And some schools, say the critics, might just leave out yawning chunks of important academic content because they are driving through a pet theme or feel entitled to push a favourite political barrow thanks to the curriculum’s focus on, say, “equity”. Or simply because they can’t hire the skilled teachers needed to turn the curriculum’s broad, open-ended goals into worthwhile classroom programmes.

Donnelly: “Often stuff gets lost when it’s translated into the classroom by different schools and teachers. And there’s an equity argument. It shouldn’t depend on luck or chance ... There’s a certain critical mass of knowledge that all kids have a right to know, and if you base everything too much on local-based curriculum development, where you are reflecting the local community, or local aspirations and identity, that could be a road to injustice and inequality.”

And he argues there are huge workload issues for teachers. Western Australia abandoned outcomes-based education in favour of a return to detailed syllabus documents late last year, partly because of complaints from teachers about excessive workload and lack of guidance.

Indeed, in a 2001 report, ERO warned that some teachers were struggling to develop good-quality programmes that met the “vague” requirements of the curriculum statements of the 90s. The workload was “unnecessarily onerous” for some teachers, there was a lack of high quality resources, and teachers who were inexperienced, new to New Zealand or lacking in a strong support structure had the greatest difficulties.

“In countries such as Korea and Singapore, considerable effort is given to specifying curriculum requirements clearly and to providing teachers with comprehensive, high-quality resources,” ERO said. New Zealand teachers are “currently expected to be experts not only in pedagogy but also in curriculum development, implementation and review”, and there was “considerable variation in the quality of teaching programmes within schools”.

Byron Bentley, principal of Auckland’s Macleans College and chair of the Education

Forum, claims New Zealand is asking for trouble by leaving it up to schools and teachers to interpret such a broad, non-specific document, given the “crisis” in available teachers.

The PPTA’s own figures bear out Bentley’s point: a 2007 staffing survey found that 29% of positions could not be properly filled, 25% of schools had vacancies filled temporarily with untrained and unqualified relievers, 17% of classroom teacher jobs attracted no New Zealand applicants and 37% of schools had appointed overseas teachers to permanent positions.

And a survey by the Auckland Primary Principals’ Association showed 73% of shortlisted job applicants in November and December last year were regarded as “very poor” or “poor”. A third of applicants were from overseas. Association president Ken Pemberton told the *NZ Herald* that the teacher-supply crisis was the worst in about 15 years.

National Party education spokeswoman Katherine Rich reports Ministry of Education figures showing a huge bleed of new teachers from the profession – between 2000 and 2005, 16,000 teachers graduated, but only half of those were in the classroom after three years.

John Langley, dean of the faculty of education at the University of Auckland, supports the move in the new curriculum to place more discretion in the hands of schools and classroom teachers. But he says that if we want to attract and retain the skilled professionals needed to make such an approach successful, teacher pay rates need to be aligned with performance.

“We have this ridiculous insistence that all teachers should be paid the same regardless of the quality of what they do. I think we need to be looking long and hard at the packages we offer teachers, and for starters we could perhaps increase base salary by 15-20%, but make the last 10% of that based on the learning outcomes of kids. I’m not suggesting national testing. I’m suggesting that teachers – and all good teachers do this – identify the learning outcomes they want, where they want to get their kids to get to throughout the year, and if they achieve that they get something worthwhile at the end of it.

“If you are a bright young graduate, you have opportunities in a range of professions. I have spoken to many graduates like that and a lot of them have thought about teaching, but they look at what’s provided – career opportunities and salary packages – and there are other things they can do which are just easier.”

Similarly, school funding needs an overhaul: Langley says decile-linked funding – where schools in poor areas get more and those in rich areas get less – should be ditched, and replaced with a system whereby schools are funded according to whether they achieve their goals for lifting student achievement.

It should come as no great surprise that Frances Nelson, president of the primary teachers' union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), is not enthralled with the idea of pay being linked to student outcomes. Like many teachers and principals interviewed by the *Listener*, she's a strong supporter of the new curriculum, but she says the government needs to follow through with the requisite professional development and teaching resources.

And if it doesn't? Then there's the potential to "create disparities and to compromise the learning of children".

Not that Nelson is interested in picking a fight with Education Minister Chris Carter, who promises a veritable feast of teacher support: resource packs are on their way to schools, there's stuff on the web, there are "sector leaders" who will "facilitate professional learning opportunities", and there are resources on the all-important key competencies. And schools have until 2010 to implement the thing.

ERO will be playing its important evaluation role, too, he says – checking to make sure schools are doing what they ought.

And precisely how will ERO assess whether kids are learning key competencies such as "thinking", "managing self" or "relating to others", thus ensuring that these requirements are not simply ignored by busy teachers as meaningless babble?

Well, says ERO boss Graham Stoop, it doesn't check schools are implementing the entire curriculum – that's up to boards of trustees. But ERO might, for instance, "develop a series of evaluation indicators on a broad area, which would include the thinking skills".

Right.

For his part, Carter is certain that New Zealand's education system is steaming in the right direction. He's not long back from an education ministers' conference in London, where he says his inter-national peers were interested in the terrific things going on in our schools.

The latest data tells the good news: in the recent OECD-run Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), New Zealand students scored highest in the English-speaking world, he says. (In fact, New Zealand 15-year-olds ranked seventh overall in science, fifth in reading, and 11th in maths.)

Donnelly, alas, has other figures that support his version of the truth. Data from the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study, produced by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Advancement (known as the IEA), suggests New Zealand's performance isn't so flash. At the last assessment in 2002-03, New Zealand 14-year-olds came 20th out of 46 countries for maths and 13th for science. Singapore, with its more highly detailed and prescribed curriculum approach, came top in both subjects.

Our PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – also run by the IEA) is nothing to write home about, either. New Zealand 10-year-olds came 24th out of 40 countries in reading comprehension in the last assessment in 2006.

There's also the well-documented problem of New Zealand's long tail of educational underachievement – ERO estimated in 2005 that as many as one in five kids was failing at school.

However, findings from the National Education Monitoring Project, which assesses students at Years 4 and 8 every four years, show a reduction in disparities in some subject areas, says Terry Crooks, co-director of the Education Assessment Research Unit, which runs the project. Among the more noteworthy changes is a “dramatic” narrowing of the gap between Pacific Island and Pakeha students at Year 4 in reading, maths, writing and social studies; and between Maori and Pakeha students at Year 4 there was a “substantial” reduction in disparity in reading and a more modest reduction in maths.

But just how much does the curriculum influence student achievement, really? The 2002 Curriculum Stocktake described it as one of only nine factors that mattered – alongside things like the home environment, quality of teaching and student aptitude. Furthermore, “the links between curricula and student outcomes are indirect ... the design of curriculum, no matter how well crafted, cannot, on its own, guarantee that effective teaching or assessment practice takes place”.

No kidding. In the end, Christchurch Boys' High principal Trevor McIntyre – who approves of the new curriculum and the flexibility it gives to schools – suspects the same things that have always influenced student learning will continue to do so. “I

still think good education is about good relationships ... Thank goodness in New Zealand we still have a predominantly passionate, enthusiastic staff who give a lot of their extra time to ensure good outcomes for students.”

If only there were enough of them.

Next week: the Australian curriculum.

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