

Knitting!!

INSIGHTS and OVERSIGHTS by Lester Flockton:

Curriculum – the Great Knitting Industry

When I was a pupil at primary school a long time ago, numeracy and literacy were without question the priorities of the day. But in those days, they were called arithmetic and English. The Department of Education provided every child in New Zealand with standard textbooks for those two subjects. Furthermore, there was a different textbook for each year level (“standard”).

The arithmetic textbook contained exercises in number facts (tables), computation (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division), money, fractions, measures, some geometry and some statistics. Each section also contained “word problems”, which required us to apply arithmetical processes and knowledge to everyday situations. The English textbooks, as I recall, contained lots of exercises on things like there/their; was/were; is/are, nouns, verbs, adjectives, phrases, clauses, punctuation and paragraphing. The textbooks for each year were consistently thematic in their layout and coverage, but incrementally more advanced and thicker at each stage.

When I studied to become a teacher, Arithmetic was being renamed Mathematics, and English renamed Written Expression. These new titles were intended to signal major changes in content and practice based on important new pedagogical understandings. Mathematics, for example, was to become a subject that emphasised learning through understanding rather than rote.

Written Expression was to emphasise the development of capability and confidence through experience-based writing rather than through isolated grammar, spelling and composition exercises. These changes were some of the most important and defensible shifts in the history of our curriculum. Success in achieving such shifts, however, is always far from uncomplicated. Progressivism collides with traditionalism, and the absolute necessity for true quality teacher professional development is compromised by quick flick expedients.

History repeats itself, and nowhere in education is this becoming more disturbingly evident than in the area of curriculum. Moreover, the paradigm is becoming increasingly complicated as we add all sorts of new ingredients which together amount to what I call the fashion factor. What we do today looks smarter than yesterday. Why? Because we’ve changed something!

But why? The fashion factor serves and spins an education psyche and an education economy – it creates new demands on time and money, new jargon, new fads, new panaceas, new clients, new packages, new jobs, new excitement, new headaches. But how do we know that it produces better teachers, better learning, and ultimately a better education? Where

is the substantive and sustainable evidence that answers this fundamental question? It's not easy to produce let alone find.

The question, "*Why do we need to change our curriculum?*" begs answers of integrity. But perhaps more importantly, it begs a community of thought that doesn't simply buy in for fear of not being adorned by the latest package. Arguably, curriculum at both national and local (school) levels should always be under review, and changed for the better provided we are satisfied that it will be better.

New Zealand's national curriculum has been undergoing an official Ministry of Education "stocktake", but in a curious way. After all, how much do *you* know about it, and what might *you* think about it? Curious? One thing's for sure – a stocktake is needed, and that stocktake needs to more effectively examine the nature of curriculum itself as well as the nature of curriculum change, content and delivery. For the past ten or so years our national curriculum could be likened to a huge knitting industry. Big pattern books. Everyone being enticed into contracts promoting new patterns and new fashion garments. The net result: we discover that one pattern and one size DOES NOT FIT ALL. The consequence: unpicking the knitting – then re-knitting?

Instead of persisting with the metaphorical knitting, I would strongly argue for robust critical and analytic thinking at every level of the system with the goal of having a curriculum design which is built on good doses of common sense attuned to best professional and pedagogical practice. At all levels, questions for curriculum design are basic: What are the really important abilities and attitudes we want our children to develop and which we know to be realistic? What do we need to do to have confidence that we will be successful in helping children develop those abilities and skills? How will we know and show that we are being successful? When we are not successful, what are real as opposed to the perceived causes?

The State has a legitimate role in outlining (note) its expectations. The school has a role in exercising local interpretation of those expectations. There can be no one packaged solution for dropping on every school's doorstep. There is no one best blueprint for all, and there is no holy grail!

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