

Uptake of the Curriculum Stocktake? Part 1

In 1993 New Zealand made manifest a new approach to the structure, development and implantation of a changed form of "official" school curriculum. The "newness", however, was relative. New for New Zealand, but not new elsewhere. Our government, following the advice of its Ministry of Education, substantially trailed the coat tails of a model of strands, levels and achievement objectives already up and going elsewhere. This adoption, without collaboration or partnership with the educational community, is another example of that pathological "global drip" which eats away at indigenous thought, talent and enterprise.

Since 1993 each subject (now called a "learning area") has been reincarnated through a contractually directed process which has produced syllabuses (now called "national curriculum statements") for each of seven essential learning areas. One of the original intentions was that the adopted model would lead to sharpened forms of accountability using a blunt device. That intention has never been realised.

Curriculum has always been a matter of debate, dispute and difference of opinion across the broadest spectrum of interest. New Zealand's "reformed" curriculum has not escaped such questioning and scrutiny. If anything, it has been heightened by serious and searching questions and concerns about the validity and integrity of the adopted model and its content.

About two years ago the Ministry of Education acknowledged the need for some discourse on the festering issues of its new curriculum – albeit a controlled "by invitation only" discourse which was staged for the less offensive official purpose of "establishing strategic direction for ongoing review". But what was placed on the table by the non-Ministry invitees during that early discourse was honest, frank, instructive and clearly representative of the worries of numerous experienced practitioners. Many of those concerns, in summary, are listed here.

- The national curriculum is overcrowded. Depth is sacrificed for breadth – with implications for student learning and teacher workload.
- Overcrowding is compromising potential for flexibility.
- The unintelligibility of curriculum documents for large numbers of parents.
- The process of curriculum development and change in the early 1990s was politically motivated and exclusive of teachers.
- The artificial structuring of achievement objectives and levels does not adequately match the realities of learning and teaching.
- The arbitrary nature of the levels and the mismatch between the levels and the learning processes of students.
- Difficulties the level structure generates for reporting to parents.
- Achievement objectives and levels undermine teacher creativity.
- A failure to adequately value co-curricular activities.
- Assessment practices and models undermining quality learning and teaching.
- Concerns about the impact of the Education Review Office in its compliance driven view of curriculum.

Uptake on issues raised in the curriculum stocktake is well overdue, but what shape will they take?