

Uptake of the Curriculum Stocktake Part 2

Any stocktake of the Ministry of Education's curriculum, whatever one's definition of curriculum, needs to freely admit that while curriculum has an epistemological component (to do with a philosophy of knowledge) it is measurably a social and political construct. That is, it is something put together by a group of individuals under the auspices and directions of government employees who might claim to know or represent the common wishes of a sensible society.

This, of course, begs questions of sensible and society. Indeed, who IS this society? I for one don't subscribe to everything that is inscribed in the Ministry of Education's (note) curriculum, yet I am often told that I am a sensible man, an experienced educationist and a responsible member of society. I suspect that if we had a wide and open forum on curriculum (not sponsored, chaired and directed by the Ministry of Education), we might find numerous others with rich, valid and useful ideas about curriculum. If we are to attain something of a credible notion of a valid curriculum, we need to find a structure that allows ample discretion for localism while recognising the need for a well educated nation of citizens.

By definition, there is a well established hierarchy of curriculum. By hierarchy, I mean levels of genuine impact and importance for the learner. At the lowest level we have what is termed the "official" or "state" curriculum which prescribes and authorises content and coverage according to the views of those contracted to formulate such documents.

In New Zealand's 1928 Syllabus of Instruction for Public Schools the requirement in English was for the teacher to strive to develop in pupils "the power of clear, fluent, and accurate expression, oral and written". In the Ministry of Education's 1994 English Curriculum Statement, the general aim is to enable students to engage with and enjoy language in all its varieties, and to understand, respond to, and use oral, written, and visual language effectively in a range of contexts. The difference between the earlier and the later documents is in the amount of detail and the invocation of fashion jargon.

Arguably, at the end of the day a literate person will be one who performs according to the 1928 syllabus expectations - which well post-dates the dinosaurs!

The next level in the hierarchy of curriculum is often termed the "implemented" curriculum. This amounts to what the school and the individual teachers actually do with the official curriculum and the interpretations they choose to make on it.

Inexperienced teachers might tend to look for a well defined crutch (such as that provided by the Ministry curriculum), whereas the more experienced, knowledgeable and confident teacher will (hopefully) make discerning professional judgements about the relevance and validity of government prescribed curriculum for her children, her school, and her community. That is, at the level of the implemented curriculum the teacher plays a key role in decisions about what matters most according to localised needs, priorities and opportunities. This teacher interprets the official curriculum selectively in order to construct what becomes the implemented curriculum.

The highest level of curriculum is called the "experienced" curriculum. This amounts to what actually touches, influences and leaves a lasting impression on the minds and actions of learners.

It would be a nonsense to claim that all such learning is the consequence of a Ministry of Education official curriculum or indeed the most skilful teacher's implemented curriculum.

Much of learning and attainment is measurably the consequence of the day to day interactions that pupils have with friends, family, their community and their environment in its widest sense (including the TV and computer). This is the level of high impact on achievement.

Learning, achievement, attainment and progress are some sort of complex mix of the consequences of the official, the implemented and the experienced curriculum. Let's hope that the Ministry's (it's not ours) curriculum stocktake takes stock of the potentially harmful effects of an overemphasis on prescription and compliance with the unfounded belief that one size fits all.

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