



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

*School of Education*

Te Kura Toi Tangata

**Waikato Journal of Education**

Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 14: 2008/2009



# WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

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*Waikato Journal of Education* is a refereed journal, published annually, based in the School of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, 3240, New Zealand. It publishes articles in the broad field of education. For further information visit the WJE website <http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/wje/>

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Subscriptions: Within NZ \$35; Overseas NZ \$45

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Publisher: School of Education, The University of Waikato

Cover design: Donn Ratana

Printed by: Waikato Print

ISSN 1173-6135

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## **INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION ON CURRICULUM**

**CLIVE MCGEE**

*Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato*

Curriculum and curriculum change is the topic of this special section. The focus is upon school curriculum. From the beginning of compulsory schooling in New Zealand in 1877 there has been a national curriculum designed to provide all students with a general education, regardless of their circumstances. At fairly regular intervals the curriculum was revised. At first, teachers and the general public had little involvement in revisions. Gradually, a more consultative approach emerged and from the 1950s there was greater teacher involvement through teacher association committees and groups and increasing opportunities for public submissions and discussion through several major reviews of national curriculum (McGee, 1997). Curriculum revision has always been a contestable activity, since a principal purpose of a national curriculum is to indicate the most worthwhile knowledge to be taught in schools and learned by national student cohorts. There has always been competition between advocates of different subjects for a place in a national curriculum. Within subjects, too, there has been competition between factions for a larger stake. Consequently, what is not in the curriculum may be as important as what is chosen. Indeed, school curriculum includes but a small number of existing subjects and a small amount of the information contained in any included subject.

It is widely acknowledged that a new or revised national New Zealand curriculum will not, by itself, bring about the changes in teachers that are needed to implement it. For many years the state has accepted a responsibility for the provision of resources that are essential tools for teachers and students. It has also provided professional development and learning for teachers to learn to understand a new curriculum and adjust their approaches to planning and classroom teaching and learning. Understanding the levels and types of support that are needed is challenging and problematic. There is, inevitably, tension between the state and teachers over professional learning: the amount, type and access.

As a background to these important issues, in the first paper in the first part of this section on curriculum change, Clive McGee and Bronwen Cowie have surveyed the broad field of curriculum development, particularly in New Zealand. They point out that there have been two major recent phases of national curriculum change in New Zealand. In the 1990s a year 1-13 curriculum was designed. There was little input from teachers and the curriculum gave greater emphasis to coverage of specific learning outcomes. In contrast revisions were carried out in the 2000s with much wider consultation, resulting in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) being designed, ratified and sent to schools for implementation by 2010. The paper looks at some of the issues related to implementation of curriculum generally, such as school leadership, alignment of change with previous school programmes, and professional development and learning of teachers. It is

issues like these that need to be considered as schools respond to the new national curriculum.

The other two papers in this first section are related to a research project being carried out by New Zealand Council for Educational Research and Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research. The *Curriculum Implementation Exploratory Studies* project has been studying a sample of primary and secondary schools that were early adopters of the 2007 national curriculum. From interviews with school leaders and teachers and school trustees, the researchers identified themes (or factors) that emerged as indicators of successful early adoption of aspects of the new curriculum. Along with school documents related to work on the curriculum, these interviews allowed the researchers to construct a holistic view of a school. The wider context of a school could then be aligned to key matters such as how teachers have reacted to change, how communities are involved with schools, and how the existing curriculum and the new version are aligned. Of course, alignment with students and their school experiences and achievements are important, too; however, further research will need to probe this alignment.

From the research, two papers are presented. A paper by Michele Morrison and Beverley Cooper examines the role of leadership in early adopter secondary schools, particularly the role of the principal. On the basis of the emerging evidence it is argued that a number of characteristics of school leaders are common across principals. Another paper by Jenny Ferrier-Kerr, Paul Keown and Anne Hume reports findings from case study schools regarding professional development and learning. Again, the emerging evidence suggests that certain factors are necessary in a school to bring about successful change in implementing new curriculum.

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