

The NZ Curriculum: the Southbridge Way

Lecture given to third year teacher trainees

University of Canterbury College of Education

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I have been invited to talk to you today about the New Zealand Curriculum, and how we use it at Southbridge School. I'm sorry, this sounds like a heavy burden to lay upon you in your final days as a student, when probably the thing that is uppermost in your minds at present is how to convince somebody to give you a job.

So, here's what I'm going to do. I'll tell you some things about how I view the NZC and the role it plays at Southbridge School. Then I will talk a bit about how I think you can become a teacher any school principal would break their neck to employ.

Throughout this talk I am happy to be sidetracked, distracted or simply bought off by your questions or comments so please don't hesitate to interrupt me. We will have time for discussion at the end. Copies of this talk and the slideshow are available on our school website so you can spare your notebooks.

Curriculum – layers and layers of it.

Let me start with the word 'curriculum'. Can we have some definitions please?

Somebody once told me 'curriculum' means 'what we do around here'. This suits me, and in my view a school's curriculum is the total of all the experiences available to enrich learning in that school.

I want you to consider a school curriculum in layers:

The first layer is the formal curriculum and within this is what I call the curriculum that is taught and the curriculum that is learned. The distinction between the two is often huge – as I hope to show.

The second layer is an informal curriculum and I have chosen to describe this as the curriculum that is modelled and the curriculum that is explored.

The Taught Curriculum

Let's look first at the taught curriculum. In almost every New Zealand school the curriculum that is taught is now based on this document – the NZC.

There are many things I like about the NZC and they boil down to a belief that this document expands the concept of the taught curriculum. First, the NZC shifts the emphasis from content to process. It is not a prescription of targets

or outcomes. The first 44 pages of the document, from the Vision statements to the Role of the Board of Trustees, are essentially about why and how. These pages require us to focus on the kind of learning organisation we wish to be, the ideas and values of the various stakeholders and the means of achieving our vision.

The Achievement Objectives, the bits that guide us in what to teach, are found in the fold out pages at the back of the document. The big words, the headlines, are Values, Principles, Competencies and Pedagogy. In the pages describing each curriculum area is a section headed 'why?' 'Why study science?' 'Why study arts?'

The messages here for teachers are that education has a moral purpose, that learning is for life and that student achievement is an unfolding journey, not a collection of discrete packages of knowledge that have little or no relationship to each other. As stated on p.39:

“each student’s ultimate learning success is more important than the covering of particular achievement objectives.”

The second reason why I think the NZC has the potential to be a catalyst for transformational change is that it reaffirms the relationship between schools and their communities that were central to the model of self management set up 20 years ago under the title Tomorrow’s Schools.

When I read the first draft of the NZC the thing that struck me most forcefully was the insistence of the writers that schools construct their curriculum in consultation with their communities. The document compels us as teachers to come down from the mountain, to engage parents, children and whanau in a genuine conversation about values, aspirations and learning theory.

It compels us to listen – something we find terrifically hard to do – and to share our professional knowledge. It places a burden upon us as educators to be vulnerable, to experiment with new ideas in the full spotlight of community focus, to admit mistakes and to try again. At the same time it requires our communities to accept the responsibility of partnership: to take ownership of the curriculum, to support us in our work, to back us to succeed.

The most exciting part of all this is that the NZC connects the home-school partnership directly to student achievement. It encourages us to say to our parents and community “your involvement can make a difference to learning.”

This is a revolutionary idea and I can tell you it’s a hard one to get across to the well-meaning home and school committee that sees its role solely as fundraising, or the parent who understands that joining the weekend working bee is the way to get involved in school. These are all good and necessary activities but, as John Hattie and others inform us, they make no contribution to student learning. We must involve parents and community in other ways.

So, potentially the NZC is a tool for breaking down the barriers in children's minds between school and the rest of their lives. At Southbridge we talk about the 'vanishing school'. When I first mentioned this the children became very excited that we intended the school to disappear. What we mean by this slogan is that we will make Southbridge School vanish in the way that a familiar object, a picture on the wall of the lounge for example, vanishes because it becomes so much a part of the foreground of our lives that we cease to notice it. If we do the vanishing act really well children will cease to know when they are in or out of school. There is plenty of evidence that student achievement improves if we can connect school with life.

Within the concept of the 'vanishing school' we talk about Inside-Out, Outside-In learning, which simply means children learning in the world beyond the boundaries of the school, and the world coming in to enrich learning in the school. This can take many forms – including virtual worlds. Fundamental to this way of learning is an inquiry approach, and again the NZC provides a blueprint for inquiry learning.

Remember, we are talking here about the curriculum I call the taught curriculum. This is about what we as teachers do and the really big challenge of the NZC is to take all this new theory about community consultation and key competencies and inquiry learning and carry this through to the actual, daily, moment-by-moment acts of teaching our children experience. We have to teach in different ways than we have taught in the past.

This challenge is yours. If you imagine your career over the next 20, 30 or 40 years I am sure you want to become the best teacher you are able to be. Let me tell you about some of the things you are up against in realising that ambition.

I want to mention Professor Graham Nuthall, (and I hope Graham's name and work are known to you. If they are not, I urge you to find out. It will be the best preparation for your teaching career I can imagine). In 2001 Professor Nuthall delivered a lecture summarising his 40 years of research into how children learn and how teachers teach. He had this to say:

"We all spend at least 10 of the most formative years of our life in school. We all become, through this common experience, experts in what it means to be a teacher and a student. As we often jokingly complain, everyone is an expert on schooling...."

He continued:

"Much of what we do in schools is a matter of cultural tradition rather than evidence-based practice...much of what we believe about teaching is a matter of folklore rather than research..."

Nuthall's revelations should be depressing. His message to me as a teacher is that, far from being the source of inspiration to a child, more often than not I am an impediment to that child's learning. Be warned. His message for all of you is that despite three years of excellent teacher training, despite your ideals and aspirations, when you stand in front of your own classroom the

model of how to teach that you follow will be instinctive. You will almost certainly end up teaching the way your teachers taught you. I hope they were good.

The Learned Curriculum

Let's look at the second part of the formal curriculum – the learned curriculum.

Thirty years ago Graham Nuthall did something that until then no other educational researcher had ever done. He began eavesdropping on children's learning. Here in Christchurch Nuthall set up banks of hidden microphones and video cameras in a couple of classrooms and gathered hundreds, thousands of hours of video and audio tape which was transcribed and then sifted through. From this evidence Nuthall tapped into the secret lives of learners and he found something sensational – the learned curriculum is often wildly different from the taught curriculum, and for some students at some times what they learn bears no relationship at all to what is being taught. Nuthall summed up his findings in a small and very readable book called *The Hidden Lives of Learners*, which I urge you to read – or get somebody to buy you a copy for Christmas.

Nuthall found among other things that a student's preconceptions around an item of learning have a powerful bearing on whether the learning will be successful or not. He and his team came to know their learners so well they could predict with almost unerring accuracy who was going to learn what in a topic.

Professor Nuthall went on to describe how there exists in every classroom a culture of learning (or not learning) that is practically independent of the teacher and how, despite efforts to get to grips with this culture, to make teaching and learning more effective, teachers almost always revert to, and perpetuate, the same old techniques that have always happened and often failed.

Despite this Graham Nuthall's work is inspiring because he boils his 40 years of painstaking research into how children learn down to a few very attainable pieces of advice for the teacher. I won't tell you what they are – you can find that out for yourself – but the message I take from his work is that I can be an effective teacher by trying to understand the rich world that exists within the heads of the learners in my classroom. The best way to do this is by remaining a learner myself.

I will come back to that last point shortly, but first let us explore the second layer of curriculum, the informal layer, which I separate into the modelled and explored curricula.

The Modelled Curriculum

In a previous career I was an actor and if that has made a difference at all to my effectiveness as a teacher it is probably that it has made me a bit more

aware of the effect that my voice, my movements, my presence, can have on a child's learning.

Hiam Ginot, an American psychologist, described years ago about how as teachers we, the teachers, "create the climate and the weather in the classroom." We determine the atmosphere for learning, whether positive or negative. I would go further and say it is not just in the classroom that this happens. Every moment of every day we are at school we are teaching simply by the way we be. Every tiny action and interaction is an act of teaching.

Children are sponges. They are programmed to learn and the thing they most want to learn is how to be in this world. Instinctively they observe the adults around them in order to learn how to get on: how to make and maintain friendships, how to act when you're angry or upset, how to celebrate, how to solve problems.

So every day when I walk into school I tell myself it is performance time. I don't mean this in a showy-off dramatic way – simply as a reminder that everything I do is potentially being observed and absorbed by a child. I don't want to scare you with this, and I certainly don't mean you have to be on your best behaviour all the time, or to be somebody different from who you are. But be aware that what you model has an effect – and choose whether what you model is positive or negative.

The Explored Curriculum

Just as children look to adults to model how to be in the world they also seek the same from their peers. I remember a school not too far from here that a number of years ago cut its lunch break to half an hour and finished the school day at 2.30pm. They claimed it cut down the fights in the school grounds at lunchtime and sending the children home earlier saved power costs in the winter. What they ignored was the rich explored curriculum that happens during that additional half hour.

Children want and need time to explore learning free from the interference of adults. They will do it in the classroom despite our best efforts to manage their behaviour and they will do it in the playground to their joy and pain. We may be deeply unimpressed at some of the things we think they are learning through their exploratory curriculum, but perhaps the amazing thing is just how moral and orderly is the world children create among themselves – mostly.

When we consider these four curricula - the taught, the learned, the modelled and the explored - we get a picture of the relative roles of teachers and students in creating learning, and the equation looks to be a lot more balanced than we as teachers usually believe. Far from being the fountain of all wisdom teachers are, at most, equal partners with students in creating the curriculum.

The Teacher as Learner

Actually, when you reflect on this the distinction between teacher and learner begins to blur and then vanish completely. Students can be teachers and – wonderfully – teachers can, must, be learners.

How can you as a teacher continue to be a learner? Well, it's not easy. Professor Richard Elmore of Harvard University argues that schools are hostile and inhospitable places for the learning of adults. There are a few reasons for this. I will mention only one here, but it is at the heart of the problem and it is one that you have the power to overcome.

It is the privatisation of teaching.

As a beginning teacher you will go through a support and guidance programme until you reach full registration. All too often what happens at the end of those two years is that the now fully registered teacher vanishes into the private world of his or her practice. Potentially, for the next umpteen years of your career the only time a fellow professional will see you teach is when the principal or syndicate leader conducts your annual appraisal, and appraisal is almost never about professional learning.

To continue to be learners we must share our practice, making our work visible to others and having their work visible to us.

There is a name for this sort of arrangement. It is called a Professional Learning Community. A school that is a professional learning community is one where teachers share their knowledge and skills through discussion, observation of teaching and research. It is a school where teachers don't simply collect assessment data, they talk about it, pick it apart and try to make meaning of the results in order to plan better teaching and learning experiences. It is a school where teachers have got over feeling insecure about what they and their colleagues do in their classrooms.

Creating a professional learning community presents challenges for school leaders, for they too need to become learners – leaders of learning. And if it is hard for teachers to unlock the privacy of their teaching practice it is far more scary for principals who have sat in an office for years.

But, to bring this talk full circle, the NZC guides us towards becoming learners. It took me some time to appreciate that this document is for all learners, not just students. The pages on pedagogy and assessment, particularly the model of teaching as inquiry learning, are a valuable place to begin forming a professional learning community.

Remember you cannot be an excellent teacher if you are not also an excellent learner. You cannot expect to get inside the heads of the children you teach if you cannot recall what turned you on to learning when you were a child and the world was fresh. I believe students learn best when teachers are learning. Even if the things you are learning do not relate directly to increasing student

achievement the simple act of modelling learning will be one of the most powerful things you can do, and be, for your students.

And when we define the realm of learning, remember the four layers of curriculum. Learning is not confined to the things we can put in a teaching plan, or an assessment rubric. Learning is not determined by a set of achievement objectives. In everything you do as both a teacher and a learner do not measure it by asking 'what was achieved', but 'what has been learned.'

The NZC presents us with the challenge of transforming education in New Zealand. It is the best work the policy makers, academics, researchers and consultants could do. But it is not they who will make the transformation. That is up to you - the teachers.

You are the guardians of education and the heroes of learning. I wish you well.

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Some Discussion Starters

- **How can you as a beginning teacher in a school contribute to a professional learning community?**
- **How do you think you can tap into the hidden lives of the learners in your class? Do you even think it is desirable to do so?**
- **Think of the influential teachers in your life. What did they model that you picked up on?**
- **How can you enable students to be independent learners?**