

The NZ Curriculum: the changing paradigm

Lecture given to third year teacher trainees

University of Canterbury College of Education

23rd February 2009

I have been invited to talk to you today about the New Zealand Curriculum, this new document which becomes the operating curriculum for New Zealand schools from the beginning of 2010 – at the very moment when you stand in front of your first classroom as fully qualified teachers.

I am unsure how much you know about the new curriculum and it would be unfair of me to test you this early in the academic year when your minds are focussed on O week, but I can tell you that this document is important to you.

The school you enter as a beginning teacher will, or should, be undertaking a journey of self-review that must, but may not, result in changes to the way teaching and learning happen in that school. In your first teaching job you can expect to be working with teachers who are trying new things. They may be working out how to involve their community in curriculum design, how to teach and assess key competencies, how to honour diversity and promote ecological sustainability.

To help you understand the process that the schools of your future employment have been going through I want to start with a brief description of what we at Southbridge School have been doing to implement the New Zealand Curriculum. I then want to talk to you about the role I see you taking in the unfolding process of school transformation in New Zealand, and about how you can become the best teacher you are able to be.

If this sounds a bit heavy for your first Monday morning back at work I will also offer some advice about how to get yourself a job at the end of the year.

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. I hope we will have time for discussion at the end of the talk. Copies of this talk and the slideshow are available so you can spare your notebooks.

The NZC – Southbridge's story.

The subtitle of this talk is The Changing Paradigm. I wasn't really sure what the word 'paradigm' meant so I looked it up and discovered that it means 'model' or 'example'.

So, we're offering the idea that the NZC is a document for changing the model of curriculum delivery in NZ schools. Having worked with the document for two years I believe it can be the catalyst for tremendous change to the ways in which we conduct teaching and learning in our schools. There are two reasons for this.

First, the NZC shifts the emphasis in the construction of school curriculum from content to process. The first 44 pages of the document, from the Vision statements to the Role of the Board of Trustees, are essentially about how we will deliver curriculum in our schools. The Achievement Objectives, which are the prescription of what we will teach, are found in the fold out pages at the back of the document. The big words, the headlines, in this document 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 – the paradigm! – 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.

I’m sure you can imagine how scary this is for many teachers, principals and parents.

At Southbridge School, community consultation became our point of entry into the process of implementing the NZC. All the work that we have done over the past two years; on vision, values, principles or key competencies, has been within a framework of community consultation.

‘Consultation’ is a slippery word so let me spend a moment to define what it means to me, and I’ll start by telling you what it does not mean.

Consultation does not mean making a decision as a principal or staff and then sending it out to the community for their endorsement.

Consultation does not mean hiring an educational consultant to implement his or her vision of the NZC with staff and then passing this off to the community as their own work.

Consultation does not mean tacking a parent survey onto the end of the school newsletter and then taking a cursory glance at the returns. This is what I call 'ERO-proofing consultation' – done more to satisfy the auditors than to gain real information.

Consultation does not mean calling parents to a single meeting in order to 'unpack' the curriculum, and I use that ghastly bit of educational jargon intentionally.

Effective community consultation is bloody hard work. It must be both constant and continuous. It must be optimistic in the face of apathy. It must be creative because there are almost no models of effective community consultation available.

At Southbridge School our journey of community consultation has developed around a few key processes and structures.

The first is the weekly newsletter. Almost every week we tell stories about teaching and learning and about our professional development. We try to link these stories to the conversations we have been having with the community. So when our children spend the day planting native trees on the banks of the Rakaia river we link that to our conversations about authentic contexts for learning and an environmentally active curriculum. And we invite feedback: we ask our community 'is this what you mean?' 'Does this match your idea of the sort of curriculum we have been talking about?'

The second key structure is, for want of a better name, The Big Day Out. No, I'm not talking about flying to Auckland to watch Neil Young and Tahuna Breaks. The Big Day Out, and we've held two of them as part of our curriculum implementation, is an event where we gather all our staff, Board of Trustees members, a group of parents and a group of students, take them to an interesting venue, provide them with a fantastic lunch, and engage them in deep, structured discussion about how children learn, about theories of learning, about their own experiences at school, about what they really want for their children. These events generate a tremendous amount of information but, more importantly, they shift the balances of power in the relationship between school and home.

The third key structure is the parent focus group. From time to time I invite a group of parents to spend an hour telling me what they think about an aspect of curriculum development or delivery at Southbridge School. The conversations are largely unstructured insofar as I do not attempt to drive the meeting through an agenda. I put up a topic and let them do the talking. As they have grown in confidence this group has become an important source of information.

The fourth key strategy is the use of slogans. In a former career I worked as a journalist and broadcaster and while I have a healthy suspicion of headlines I understand their power to capture people's attention. At Southbridge School we have called our curriculum journey **2020VISION**. The title arose from a chance comment made to me in 2007 by a fellow principal. 'Did I realise,' he said, 'that the five year olds we enrol this year will be in year 13 in 2020?' The comment captured my imagination. I began thinking 'what do we have to do starting from now to prepare these five year olds for life as young adults in the 2020s?' **2020VISION** has become a long term strategic process for us. It is not just about implementing the NZC but about engaging with the challenge of inventing a 21st century model of education for our community and its children.

Another slogan is 'the vanishing school.' At a prize-giving assembly a year or so ago I said that our intention through **2020VISION** was to make Southbridge School vanish. This was met with great approval by most of the children. 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.

This arises from a belief that one of the greatest shortcomings of the model of schooling we have worked with for the past hundred years or so is the divergence between school and life. Part of our work in implementing the NZC is to break down barriers between school and home so that in the minds of our children they cease to see school, and the things they do there, as separate from the rest - the real part – of their lives. There is plenty of evidence that shows student achievement improves if we can connect learning at school with other knowledge, experiences and skills that children possess from the many other contexts of their lives.

To bring this part of my talk to a close, the challenge for us at Southbridge School in 2009 is to take the information we have gained from nearly two years of community consultation and use it to transform the way we do teaching and learning at Southbridge School.

This is the really hard part. At this point we, the teachers, must begin demonstrating that the ideas we have discussed and agreed upon as a community will carry through to the actual, daily, moment-by-moment acts of teaching our children experience. We must show that we can merge the community's expectations with the objectives of the NZC, the imperatives of the wider curriculum framework and good learning theory.

If we cannot effectively transform our teaching practice we can never hope to implement the NZC.

What this means for you

Are you still with me? Okay, sit up and pay attention because although I could talk a lot more about how we are doing the NZC at Southbridge School I want to get to the really important part of this lecture. I want to talk about you.

Later this year you will go out and get a job. You will get a job because you are well trained, you're ready for it and the world is crying out for teachers. You will find yourself entering a schooling system and a profession that is trembling on the brink of enormous change. The NZC is not so much a cause of this change; rather, it is a symptom of much wider and compelling forces.

The world is changing – you know this because you are swept up in it – and education must change with it. The model of schooling that has served us well, that has shaped your experience of education, will not, in my opinion, be good enough to equip the children you will be teaching for life as young adults in 2020 and beyond.

What will it be that transforms education? What force in education will it be that changes the paradigm?

It is not the NZC.

It is you - and me.

It is teachers.

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 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 that 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 our 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 continues:

“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...”

The Cultural Myths and Realities of Teaching and Learning. Jean Herbison lecture, University of Canterbury, 2001

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.

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 paradigm that you follow will be instinctive. You will almost certainly end up teaching the way your teachers taught you. I hope they were bloody good.

But actually I find Graham Nuthall's work 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, I can break the old paradigm, by understanding the rich world that exists within the heads of the learners in my classroom and by remaining a learner myself.

How can you be that learner? How can you break the mould and transform teaching not just for yourself but for the children in your classroom?

There are many obstacles and quite a few pitfalls, and you will encounter these in most of the schools you work in.

For example, one pitfall is the belief that simply acquiring new tools will cause change to happen. You will have noticed that information technology is an obsession in the education world. We break our budgets to fill classrooms with computers, interactive whiteboards, wireless internet and the latest software. What generally happens is that we just glue these flash new tools onto the old structures. We continue teaching the way we've always done and wonder why the new bells and whistles aren't delivering greater student achievement.

Another pitfall is around evidence-based practice. Graham Nuthall is right in describing teaching as being based on folk-lore rather than evidence, but what often happens in schools is that our attempts to base practice on evidence all too often come down to narrow debates about test scores. Educational systems, such as in England, that have relied heavily on this 'measurement at all costs' approach to education are now deploring the way this approach has stifled the curriculum, strait-jacketed student achievement and demoralised the teaching profession. We do well to learn from their experiences.

The Professional Learning Community

If, in order to become a good teacher, I must also become, or continue to be, a good learner how can I do that in the school environment?

Well, it's really difficult. Here's what Professor Richard Elmore of Harvard University says about schools as learning environments for teachers:

“there are few portals through which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools; few structures or processes with which teachers and administrators can assimilate, adapt, and polish new ideas and practices; and few sources of assistance for those who are struggling to understand the connection between the academic performance of their students and the practices in which they engage...Schools are hostile and inhospitable places for...the learning of adults.”

(2002, *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement*. Washington DC: Albert Shanker Institute)

There are many reasons why schools are poor places for teachers to be learners. 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.

When you enter a school and take up teaching you will go through a support and guidance programme until you reach full registration. You will be supported by a tutor teacher who observes and comments on your practice. You will be able to observe your tutor teacher and hopefully other teachers at work.

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.

Last week I talked to Associate Professor Alison Gilmore of this university about this morning's talk. I asked her what advice she would give to you from her experience of research into teaching and learning. I can't quote her exact reply but her message was to encourage you to share your practice, to keep learning by making your work visible to others and by having their work visible to you.

There is a name for this sort of arrangement. It is called a Professional Learning Community or PLC. A school that is operating as 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 frightened, insecure and judgemental about what they and their colleagues do in the classroom.

Sounds easy? Hopefully it will be easy for you, but I can assure you that for many of your soon-to-be colleagues it is very, very difficult.

Happily, some of the professional development programmes that are happening in schools today model good PLC practice. For example the ministry of education's ICT and literacy professional development contracts both incorporate a strong component of teacher reflective practice. So there are mechanisms for teachers to change the habits of a professional lifetime.

Sadly, too many schools do not participate in these programmes or if they do, they continue to view them through the lens of content rather than absorbing the messages about process. They are still working from the old paradigm that frames teacher professional development as the one-day course, the quick fix option.

You may be thinking, 'how can I land myself a job in a school that is a professional learning community?' 'How can I spot a professional learning community when I am applying for jobs?'

When you are applying for jobs later in the year it would be nice to think you'll be bold enough to interrogate an interview panel about how they conduct professional development at their school, or what role the principal plays as the leader of learning, or how they use assessment information to plan learning programmes. Who thinks they could do this...?

Yes, it does sound unlikely, I agree, so here are some tips to help you land a job in a school that operates as a PLC, that will allow you to become a great teacher and remain a great learner:

1. Pick a small school. Research evidence shows that PLCs are more likely to be successful in smaller schools, where more of the staff are directly involved with teaching.
2. Go for schools whose teachers get out a bit. A school that has one or two or several staff who have a profile as leaders of learning in the wider profession is more likely, in my opinion, to have stronger mechanisms for taking on new ideas and spreading good practice.
3. Find out about recent professional development. When you are applying for jobs dig around a bit, do your homework on the schools you are applying to. What professional development work have they done recently? This is a fairly low-stakes question to ask in an interview or you can look at the school's website or ask your lecturers here at UC who may well know, at least for Canterbury schools where the networks are very small. If you get an answer to this question you

may be able to judge if it was the kind of development that carries a component of teacher self-reflection.

Two more things you can do to promote your chances of landing a job in a professional learning community are:

4. Promote yourself as a learner for life. Use the words Professional Learning Community in your job applications to show that you are thinking about this stuff. In interviews talk about good theories of learning. Read up on the work of Graham Nuthall and others in this field and talk about it in your interviews. The interview panel that gives you a blank look when you mention this stuff may mean that this school has yet to get on the train.
5. Have a life, and if you haven't got one – get one, as my daughters have been known to say to me. Actually this piece of advice comes from Roy Heffernan, a year 6 child at Southbridge School. When I asked a group of children last week what I should tell you about what they expect from their teachers, their responses included; a sense of humour, trustworthiness and an excitement for learning. Roy looked thoughtful for a moment and then said he wants his teachers to have a life. I thought it was superb advice. When you are in a job interview show that you have a life, talk about yourself, reveal the things that make you excited.

To finish, let me tell you what the NZC says about effective teaching. It says students learn best when teachers:

- Create a supportive learning environment
- Encourage reflective thought and action
- Enhance the relevance of new learning
- Facilitate shared learning
- Make connections to prior learning and experience
- Provide sufficient opportunities to learn
- Inquire into the teaching-learning relationship

The New Zealand Curriculum, p.34

The last point anticipates the power of the professional learning community.

To this list I will add one more thing: 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.

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.

The NZC presents us with the challenge of transforming education in New Zealand. It is the best work that the policy makers, academics, researchers

and consultants could do. But it is not they who will change the paradigm. No, if we are to transform education in New Zealand the people who will do it are you – the teachers. You will be the heroes of the NZC.

You will change the paradigm.

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