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## **Curriculum integration in Aotearoa New Zealand: Rediscovering the potential of student-centred curriculum design in the middle years.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper tells the story of the evolution of curriculum integration for the middle years in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). It traces developments early in the twentieth century during the interwar period. It goes on to describe how curriculum integration was reconsidered in the 1980s and 1990s in response to concerns about unsympathetic schooling during restructuring in NZ when the need for better educational outcomes emerged as a new imperative. The paper concludes that James Beane's student-centred model of curriculum integration holds special promise as a responsive curriculum design for the middle years as currently mandated by the national curriculum.

### **Introduction**

Curriculum integration has long intrigued educators in NZ and elsewhere as a curriculum design for the middle years but the literature has been difficult to interpret and, with the exception of some recent examples, attempts to implement curriculum integration have been inadequately aligned with students' needs. In the latter half of the twentieth century most NZ educators equated curriculum integration with 'thematic units' (Fraser 2000) which is a subject-centred approach to curriculum integration where overlaps or commonalities between subject areas are brought together under the umbrella of a unifying theme. More recently Beane's (2005) student-centred or 'integrative' model of curriculum integration with respect to organising subject matter according to the needs of young adolescents (approximately 10-14 years old) has started to influence middle level education in NZ (Years 7-10) at a time when educators and policymakers representing a range of interests have been searching for better outcomes for young people in NZ.

This paper provides a rationale for curriculum integration in the middle years then outlines some of the problems and issues that have been associated with it over the last two decades. It explains that curriculum integration has a rich but forgotten heritage in NZ stemming from the New Education movement in the early twentieth century. The paper then describes gathering interest in curriculum integration in NZ over the last three decades. It culminates in a discussion of recent developments in the national curriculum and the implications for implementing curriculum integration in Years 7-10. The intention of this paper is neither to delve deeply into

the theory of curriculum integration nor to skate along the surface describing case studies, but to tread a middle path by selectively pulling together and explaining certain strands of theory and practice from the past and present. The paper is offered as a 'roadmap' to educators in NZ and elsewhere who wish to more deeply investigate curriculum integration which, in its best colours, is a seductive curriculum design that promises to respond to the unique educational needs of young adolescents.

### **Curriculum integration in the middle years**

A century of experience, bookended by the work of American progressives John Dewey (1916) and Beane (1997), indicates that a student-centred approach to curriculum integration is especially responsive to the needs of young adolescents. The research base on curriculum integration confirms that it is a sound alternative to traditional single-subject curriculum approaches (Vars 2000). The literature of curriculum integration is difficult to access with a plethora of terms including: 'interdisciplinary curriculum', 'multidisciplinary curriculum', 'transdisciplinary curriculum', 'fused curricula', 'cross-disciplinary curriculum' and 'integrative curriculum' (Dowden 2007a). In the historical context though, curriculum integration is best understood as a dichotomy of student-centred and subject-centred models derived from two separate traditions originating in the USA in the late nineteenth century (Dowden 2007b). Beane (1997) defined his student-centred 'integrative' model of curriculum integration as:

A curriculum design theory that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organisation of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area lines (p. 19).

In contrast, subject-centred 'multidisciplinary' or 'interdisciplinary' models of curriculum integration are designed and organised on the basis of the contributions the main subject areas (such as English, mathematics and science) make to a common organising theme *without* particular reference to students' interests or learning needs (Dowden 2007b). Gehrke (1998) broadly defined curriculum integration as "a collective term for those forms of curriculum in which student learning activities are built, less with concern for delineating disciplinary boundaries around kinds of learning, and more with the notion of helping students recognize or create their own learning" (p. 248). As such, Gehrke's notion of curriculum integration – which is particularly responsive to students in the middle years – implies the need for a holistic approach to teaching where subject matter, cross-curricular connections, pedagogy, assessment and the cultural context are all carefully aligned.

Early adolescence is a discrete developmental stage when young people start to make complex connections on a number of different levels. Young adolescents typically look beyond their families and begin to integrate with society, exercise increased locus of control over their lives, want and need new challenges, desire

opportunities to exercise responsibility, and invest their energy and emotions into renegotiating existing relationships and forging new ones (Brighton 2007). In unsympathetic educational settings young people soon adopt strategies to resist or avoid classroom learning. For instance, McNeil explained that mediocre learning contexts can deteriorate to the extent that teachers and students strike “a cynical bargain in which students who sense no connection between the world of the school and their own individual and collective lives, do the bare minimum to get by and resist any teacher who expects more” (1986:136-137). This notion of connection is a crucial aspect of middle schooling. Young adolescents not only need to feel competent, they need to consciously connect competencies with classroom achievement (Stevenson 2002). In addition young adolescents do not learn effectively unless they develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers and can connect schooling with everyday experiences (Beane 1990). Indeed, middle schooling experience in NZ (e.g. Milne 2007) and in Australia (e.g. Main, Bryer & Grimbeek 2004) has shown that developing good teacher-student relationships is a crucial component of sound curriculum design.

The primary purpose of curriculum integration in the middle years is to resituate subject matter into relevant and meaningful contexts which motivates learners and strengthens teacher-student relationships, and ultimately, to high quality learning outcomes that dignify young people (Beane 2005). Yet despite its credentials, curriculum integration has never been fully implemented at the systemic level. In the 1990s a handful of middle school advocates in the USA championed student-centred curriculum integration as a developmentally responsive approach for young people but it ran into opposition from conservative sources (Beane 1999). Although student-centred curriculum integration holds the moral ‘high ground’ (Gehrke 1998) in terms of meeting the diverse needs of the full range of young adolescents, its implementation in the USA and elsewhere has been sporadic.

Student-centred curriculum integration is often difficult to implement because it runs counter to almost everything the well entrenched single-subject curriculum sets out to achieve. Tyack and Tobin argued that the concept of the single-subject curriculum is a key component of what they called “the ‘grammar’ of schooling” (1994:453). This term defines a bundle of norms for schooling that are highly resistant to change. Student-centred curriculum integration sabotages this ‘grammar’ because it opposes the hegemony of the single-subject curriculum. Bernstein (1971) explained that the democratic ideology of student-centred curriculum integration redistributes power and provides free access to knowledge. Student-centred approaches tend to disrupt the smooth transfer of the privileged knowledge of the ruling elite from one generation to the next within a given society (Apple 1993). For instance, in the USA student-centred curriculum integration has been prone to persistent political pressure because it has been associated with democratic education and, as such, is not perceived as belonging to mainstream education (Beane 1997; Weilbacher 2001).

Some of the original terms, meanings and intentions of curriculum integration have been appropriated by ahistoric subject-centred approaches to curriculum design (e.g. Jacobs 1989), thus the recent literature of curriculum integration has been characterised by confusion and ambiguity (Beane 1997). Critique of curriculum integration often fails to distinguish between student-centred and subject-centred approaches. Ironically, negative criticism of curriculum integration has usually amounted to a critique of the subject-centred approach rather than the student-centred approach. In summary, even though educators in the USA and elsewhere have regularly called for curriculum designs that connect with young adolescents, the rich potential of student-centred curriculum integration to fulfil this aim has been obscured to such a degree that it often goes unrecognised.

### **A forgotten heritage**

In NZ curriculum integration is an old but almost forgotten idea. The single-subject curriculum, which makes little concession to specific needs in early adolescence, has traditionally dominated middle level education in NZ. The two-tiered structure of the education system has compromised the education of young adolescents because neither primary nor secondary schooling suits their particular needs (Stewart & Nolan 1992). As such, too many young people in NZ 'fall through the crack' between primary and secondary schooling and do not receive the kind of schooling they need or deserve (Neville-Tisdall 2002).

Fortunately old understandings about student-centred approaches to curriculum integration can be gleaned by examining official documents from the interwar period. The 'New Education' movement of the 1920s and 1930s was a catalyst for progressive innovation in NZ. Iconic innovations from this period – including model cottages, school farms and school newspapers – played an important part in a paradigm shift which resituated subject matter into meaningful contexts (Dowden in press). In particular, world class exemplars of curriculum integration (Strachan 1938; Somerset 1938) – where student-centred approaches were implemented using the local farming community as an organising theme – were important contributions to understandings about curriculum integration.

Beeby's 1938 review of NZ intermediate schooling (Years 7-8) argued that what we now describe as middle schooling had an important role to play in an integrated curriculum which would prepare young adolescents for citizenship. He asserted that "it (should be) the chief function of the intermediate school to provide ... a period of expansive, realistic, and socially integrative education that will give all future citizens a common basis of experience and knowledge (p. 210). Looking to the future, Beeby envisaged an integrated curriculum spread over four years of middle schooling. He explained that "the purpose of the four year school ... will lie in its common integrating core which all pupils will take" (p. 180).

The 1943 Thomas Report – the foundational curriculum document for mass secondary education in NZ – provided a rationale for student-centred curriculum integration (Department of Education 1943). The committee of authors signposted a commitment to adolescent needs and a departure from “the traditional academic approach” in secondary education suited to a select few but “quite inappropriate for the ordinary pupil” (p. 6). The report asserted the government had “the duty ... to encourage progressive developments” but hedged against imposing “a cut-and-dried philosophy” by leaving schools with some responsibility for developing their own curriculum (p. 1). Each school was invited to “re-examine its whole theory and practice, make up its mind about the real needs of its pupils ... and then act courageously according to its findings” (p. 3). The report insisted that the needs of young adolescents must be met by explaining that “full account should be taken of the interests, experience and relative immaturity of pupils at the early adolescent stage. This is ... so often neglected in practice” (p. 25). The committee were “strongly in favour” of a curricular approach which would take “full account ... of the interests, experiences and relative immaturity” of young adolescents (p. 25). They explained:

We have set out to ensure ... that all post-primary pupils, irrespective of their varying abilities and their varying occupational ambitions, receive a generous and well balanced education ... [aimed] firstly, at the development of the adolescent as a person; and secondly, at preparing [the individual] for an active place in our NZ society as worker, neighbour, home-maker, and citizen (p. 4).

In particular, the committee asserted that schools should regard curriculum integration as “worthy of serious trial” (p. 25). Post-war conservatism and a narrow focus on academic credentialing at the cost of student-centred approaches to schooling meant that curriculum integration was not trialled in NZ schools until forty years later. Nonetheless the enduring significance of the Thomas Report with regard to curriculum integration was its concern for the needs of young adolescents and its identification of student-centred educational methods as being especially appropriate for the middle years.

### **Recent history**

In the 1980s a new window of opportunity for innovation opened. Aware of widespread dissatisfaction with schooling in Years 9-10, Minister of Education Russell Marshall urged schools to develop programs that would be relevant and meaningful for young adolescents. A prominent innovation in this period was the longitudinal Integrated Studies Project (1986-1991) at Freyberg High School, a co-educational state school in Palmerston North. The project implemented ‘integrated studies’ in several Years 9-11 classrooms (McKinnon, Nolan, Openshaw & Soler 1991). The project resulted in significant improvements to students’ attitudes and academic results. Project students accounted for only 10% of the disciplinary problems referred to senior management staff, despite comprising 60% of the student

population at Freyberg. Moreover project students achieved significantly better results in national School Certificate (Year 11) examinations than other students at the school by generating achievement effects in the order of one standard deviation above the norm in English, mathematics and science (Nolan & McKinnon 2003). The Freyberg project breathed fresh life into curriculum integration in NZ by demonstrating that it was a valid choice for students with academic aspirations as well as being well suited to the needs of young adolescents.

A persistent problem in the 1990s was a lack of common understandings about curriculum integration among NZ educators. As discussed earlier, the literature of curriculum integration is characterised by confusion. For instance, Fraser observed that “curriculum integration is one of the most confused topics in [NZ] education ... many teachers and researchers use the term to mean a raft of things, some of which have nothing to do with curriculum integration at all” (2000:34). Nonetheless, during this period curriculum integration gradually gathered support in NZ as a credible alternative to traditional single-subject approaches (Nolan, Brown, Stewart & Beane 2000). Following successful trials in schools, the Ministry specifically endorsed curriculum integration and showcased exemplars (Ministry of Education 1997). Middle schooling advocates voiced their support for student-centred approaches to curriculum integration. Stewart and Nolan (1992) asserted that due to their unique needs “[young] adolescents ... require a form and quality of education different from that which other children receive” (p. 2). They argued that a student-centred approach to curriculum design would provide this necessary point of difference.

### **A fresh vision**

The 2000s (to the present) has been a period when the work of middle schooling advocates has been consolidated by American-NZ exchanges, new scholarship and official recognition of the middle years in the national curriculum. Multiple visits to NZ during this period by Professor Beane and Dr Penny Bishop have done much to promote middle schooling and student-centred curriculum design. Visits to the USA by middle schooling advocates in NZ such as academic Dr Pat Nolan and school principal Dr Brian Hinchco have been instrumental in providing academic and professional leadership. As a result the New Zealand Association of Intermediate and Middle Schooling (NZAIMS) has had an increasing influence on government policy. During the 2000s a burst of postgraduate scholarship on middle schooling has been completed in NZ; including at least three dissertations examining curriculum integration in the middle years.

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) (Ministry of Education 2007) is possibly the most important official document concerning middle schooling in NZ since the 1930s. The NZC designates three distinct ‘Learning Pathways’ for Years 1-6, Years 7-10 and Years 11-13 (p. 41). For the first time since state schooling commenced in 1877, the

national curriculum specifically recognises the middle years (Years 7-10) and describes the needs of young adolescents in some level of detail. The NZC states:

A [developmentally and educationally] responsive curriculum will recognise that students in these years [of early adolescence] are undergoing rapid physical development, becoming socially aware, and encountering increasingly important curriculum contexts. Particularly important are positive relationships with adults, opportunities for students to be involved in the community, and authentic learning experiences (p. 41).

The Learning Pathway for Years 7-10 is supported on an on-going basis by a 'Middle Schooling' webpage on the 'The New Zealand Curriculum Online' website (Ministry of Education 2009).

The NZC provides an extensive framework for curriculum design. The government's intention is that each school shall develop its own curriculum according to local needs. The NZC describes eight 'Learning Areas' (pp. 16-33) then states that its 'Vision' is that young people will be: 'Confident', 'Connected', 'Actively involved' and 'Life-long learners' (p. 8). The NZC specifies the 'Key Competencies' of: 'Thinking', 'Using language, symbols and texts', 'Managing self', 'Relating to others', and 'Participating and contributing' (pp. 12-13). In addition the NZC draws from 'best' research evidence to describe the 'Effective pedagogies' of: 'Creating a supportive learning environment', 'Encouraging reflective thought and action', 'Enhancing the relevance of Learning', 'Facilitating shared learning', 'Making connections to prior learning and experience', 'Providing sufficient opportunities to learn' and 'Teaching as inquiry' (pp. 34-35). This raft of descriptors from the NZC unequivocally signals the need for a student-centred approach to curriculum design in Years 7-10 because it emphasises the need for schools to develop culturally responsive curricula which align subject matter from the Learning Areas with the range of skills encompassed within the Vision and Key Competencies. As such, the NZC implicitly invites middle level teachers to implement curriculum integration. An essential point is that a subject-centred multidisciplinary curriculum would be most unlikely to achieve the holistic range of learning outcomes for Years 7-10 now mandated by the NZC (see Dowden 2007a and 2007b for a comparative analysis of student-centred and subject-centred approaches to curriculum integration).

### **Implementing curriculum integration**

Taken together, the NZC and Beane's student-centred model provides us with a roadmap rather than a blueprint for curriculum integration in NZ. In practice curriculum models are rarely implemented at anything approximating complete fidelity. Indeed, the NZC expects that the curriculum in each school will be negotiated by stakeholders and designed to meet the needs of the community. Importantly, successful curriculum design at the middle level must include a way of meaningfully including young people in such a negotiation process (Beane, 1997).

The story of Clover Park Middle School (Years 7-10) in Otara, Auckland is a testament to the potential of student-centred curriculum integration underpinned by middle schooling. Clover Park started out as an intermediate school (Years 7-8) in 1981. By 1994 it was a failing school – typified by violence and graffiti – and saddled with the highest bill for vandalism in Auckland. Yet following the implementation of a student-centred approach to curriculum integration, the school experienced a rapid turnaround – gaining high praise from the Education Review Office and extensive media attention (Neville-Tisdall, 2002). The Clover Park curriculum is based on Beane’s model of curriculum integration where the curriculum is collaboratively designed and implemented by teachers and students (Milne, 2007). Students view their learning through three domains or ‘Power Lenses’ of equal status: ‘school knowledge’ (the national curriculum), ‘self knowledge’ (personal and cultural), and ‘global knowledge’ (world citizenship). The two overarching principles linking the lenses are critical pedagogy and *whanaungatanga* or ‘social connectedness’ – where the extended family is woven into the tapestry of school life (Milne, 2007). The Clover Park curriculum is successful because it starts by valuing students’ personal and cultural knowledge and then meets students’ particular learning needs. In addition the curriculum equips students with a framework for critically interpreting their world. The curriculum design also successfully challenges students to move beyond their personal context and explore other domains. Today the same site incorporates Clover Park Middle School and Te Whanau O Tupuranga which is a bilingual (Maori/English) high school with a middle school housed within it. The two schools are in an impoverished area and are ranked as ‘decile 1’ (the bottom socio-economic rung in NZ), yet the responsive curriculum design has continued to result in positive learning outcomes for young adolescents in the community.

## **Conclusion**

In NZ student-centred approaches to curriculum integration have a long heritage. Curriculum design in the middle years is ineffective unless it meets young people’s needs and is situated in relevant personal and cultural contexts. Only in this way can the powerful potential of student-centred curriculum integration be unleashed. The NZC describes the middle years as a distinct ‘Learning Pathway’ and, by developing a best practice framework for curriculum design in each school that includes the development of a wide range of personal and social skills necessary for future employment and life-long learning, it implicitly recommends student-centred curriculum integration. Until we see significant uptake of student-centred curriculum integration at the middle level in NZ, it may be too early for optimism. Nonetheless the signs look promising, with significant reform signalled by the NZC. Old methods of educating young adolescents focusing on prescribed subject matter, which once served a purpose in the industrial era, are unsuitable. In NZ, government administrations across the political spectrum are committing to the



implementation of a responsive and educationally sound curriculum for the middle years. Indeed, the all-important history lesson from a century of experience with curriculum integration is that the middle level curriculum must be informed and driven by young adolescents' needs on a school-by-school basis and not by the political agenda of the day.

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