

What the heck even is a “knowledge-rich” curriculum?

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KEY POINTS

- A knowledge-rich curriculum has been positioned by the Minister of Education to solve perceived gaps in previous curricula and to improve equity.
- The concept of knowledge-rich curriculum draws on contested international theories that ignore education research in Aotearoa New Zealand, which marginalises mātauranga Māori rather than acknowledging powerful Māori ways of knowing.
- Decisions about what is important knowledge for ākonga are political and reflect different groups’ values and beliefs.
- Teachers need to consider what is important knowledge for their ākonga and explore how they can teach in Tiriti-honouring ways.

This article unpacks what a knowledge-rich curriculum means and how this concept has shaped the refreshed Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum. It looks at the whakapapa of the idea and how it connects with the science of learning. It explores the advantages and disadvantages of fact-based curricula and considers the essential place of mātauranga Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand curricula. Finally, it offers a series of prompts for educators to consider as they implement the new curricula.

Introduction

It seems everywhere you turn these days in education you can't get away from the term "knowledge rich". In the press release following the October 2025 curriculum drop, Erica Stanford (2025) declared the refreshed curriculum "knowledge rich". The Tāhūrangi site also emphasises this, stating, "Our strengthened national curriculum will be knowledge rich, grounded in the science of learning and nationally consistent—so that we can enable learners to get a world leading education wherever they go to school" (Ministry of Education, 2025, para. 7). In 2024, three members of the New Zealand Curriculum Coherence Group published a paper explaining their understanding of a knowledge-rich curriculum (Johnston et al., 2024). Yet there are also groups like NZEI saying it's meaningless because neither the Ministry of Education nor Cabinet have provided "a clear, Aotearoa-specific definition or design framework" cautioning that "without evidence or shared understanding, we risk replacing sound pedagogy with imported ideology" (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2025).

While the final curricula for the last six learning areas have not been finalised at the point of writing, it is clear that teachers will be expected to implement a knowledge-rich curriculum. To do this, I believe we need to have a sound understanding of what a knowledge-rich curriculum is, what it should look like, and what knowledge is important for children in Aotearoa New Zealand. A critique centred in Te Tiriti o Waitangi is important to ensure the obligations in the Education and Training Act 2025 are met. Despite recent repeats, the purpose of this Act is still to ensure an education system that honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Section 4D). Decisions about what counts as knowledge rich are always political. They reflect particular worldviews, values, and assumptions about learning, and society. Claims that the draft curricula are knowledge rich therefore require careful scrutiny. This includes examining whose knowledge

is prioritised, how knowledge is understood, how it is taught, and for whose benefit. This is particularly important in the social sciences curriculum which is being refreshed partly because of the coalition agreement between the ACT and National parties to "restore balance to the Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum".

This article examines the concept of knowledge-rich curriculum, its theoretical origins and contested interpretations. While it is focused mainly on the social sciences curriculum, many aspects will be useful for teaching of other learning areas.

What was wrong with the previous curricula?

Before we consider what the definition of knowledge rich is, it is helpful to consider what the problem is that the creators of the refreshed curriculum are trying to solve, and why they have designated the refreshed curriculum as knowledge rich.

One of the common critiques of the 2007 *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (NZC) was that its skill and conceptual focus left too much up to chance, as Arden and Hipkins (2019) put it. The high teacher autonomy meant that schools and teachers could choose what topics they focused on. This was often useful, as the school communities could identify the learning they believed was important. However, it also led to repetition of or gaps in content, or, in the case of social studies, the avoidance of potentially upsetting histories (Kidman, 2018; Manning, 2018; Sheehan, 2017). There is now some agreement that knowledge was underemphasised in the 2007 NZC. This was due to its high-level conceptual framing and the lack of promised second-tier materials that would have provided more clarity. However, there is no consensus about the important knowledge that needs to be included, or how to incorporate more knowledge into the Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum. There are four predominant views about

the knowledge gaps in the 2007 NZC, as summed up by Hughson and Wilson (2025):

1. The lack of historical knowledge in the social sciences—we need to know our past, warts and all. This perspective was the impetus for the petition by the school children who wanted the New Zealand Wars to become a compulsory part of the curriculum who were concerned with “settler silencing” in the curriculum.
2. The lack of mātauranga—we need to teach Māori ways of knowing in our schools here in Aotearoa.
3. The lack of powerful knowledge—students deserve access to high-level disciplinary knowledge, beyond what they have access to in their daily lives. This disciplinary knowledge is subject specific, so that children are learning how scientists, historians, geographers and so forth think, understand the world, and create meaning.
4. The lack of core knowledge and science of learning—students need specific knowledge to help them succeed in society, and this knowledge needs to be presented in ways that facilitate learning.

Where did the terms “powerful knowledge” and “knowledge rich” come from?

“Powerful knowledge” and “knowledge rich” perspectives are closely related, with curriculum roadshow presenter Nathaniel Swain (cited in Magee et al., 2025) arguing that the term “knowledge rich” originated out of the theory of powerful knowledge from Michael Young (2009).

First, what is knowledge? In curriculum theory, knowledge can be divided into separate categories:

- Facts, which are the discrete pieces of knowledge that can be explicitly stated; for example, the dates Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed, or that Kupe was a legendary Polynesian navigator.
- Concepts, which are the abstract, transferable, and foundational ideas that can be used to organise facts and make generalisations; for example, power, injustice, or conflict are key concepts in social studies.
- Disciplinary practices or skills, which are the ways experts in a discipline make sense of the world; for example, interpreting graphs to support their claims in social studies.

These distinctions are important because the originators of powerful knowledge and knowledge rich use the word “knowledge” in slightly different ways. Let’s unpack the whakapapa of these theories in light of how the current curriculum iteration conceptualises knowledge.

Powerful knowledge is based on one understanding of social realism (Magee et al., 2025) which frames the primary purpose of education as access to knowledge that goes beyond what children are likely to learn

in their everyday lives (Barton, 2024; Deng, 2025).

Young’s powerful knowledge theory was a response to E. D. Hirsch’s book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (Deng, 2022; Magee et al., 2025).

In his book, Hirsch claims that sociocultural learning, which he associates with project-based learning, has a disproportionately negative effect on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. He argues this is because they don’t get the knowledge needed for success from home (Hirsch, 1999)—success, to Hirsch, being economic success. The book listed a series of facts, concepts, and knowledge that Hirsch believed were essential for Americans to participate in society, suggesting these could provide the core knowledge of the curriculum. Young agreed with this approach but countered the core knowledge lists with a suggested focus on what is most important for young people to know, powerful knowledge, the knowledge most likely to explain the world, and support predictions or new ideas (Deng, 2022). While powerful knowledge does not precisely map on to school subjects, it is most often considered as disciplinary or academic knowledge and involves children learning how to think as historians, or literary critics, for example.

Supporters of knowledge-rich curricula, such as the Curriculum Coherence Group mentioned earlier, consider knowledge rich as the practical outworking of powerful knowledge in curriculum design, with the added focus on the science of learning—more than just content, they believe it also includes how best to teach the content so children learn it (Johnston et al., 2024).

So what does a knowledge-rich curriculum look like?

In March 2025, I asked the Minister of Education for her definition of knowledge-rich curriculum. The reply she gave was:

In simple terms a knowledge-rich curriculum can be broadly defined as a curriculum that prioritises the acquisition of foundational knowledge and skills, and subject matter knowledge, rather than focusing on just competencies. (E. Stanford, personal communication, March 2025)

This represents a reductive view of the previous curriculum.

The Ministry of Education indicated its approach was guided by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). AERO is not a curriculum development organisation; rather, it is a government-funded body whose role is to translate research to practice. AERO itself is not without controversy, with many critiques describing it as neoliberal, narrow, and that it cherry picks research (see, for example, Dwyer et al., 2025; Pino-Pasternak & Malpique, 2025; Tytler, 2024), while others laud it

as credible, rigorous, and transparent (see, for example, Hendrick, 2025; Snow, 2025).

AERO's research is firmly in the knowledge-rich camp. It has published a document explaining what this means in curriculum design; that a knowledge-rich curriculum should be selective, coherent, carefully sequenced, specific, and clear (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2024). These features are echoed in the Curriculum Coherence Group paper (Johnston et al., 2024). Reception of these features has been mixed, with some in the sector finding them clear and practical, while others are concerned they are reductive, particularly with regard to determining which knowledge is selected.

Learning First, the Australian company the Ministry of Education has contracted “to contribute to development across the strengthened NZC as a whole” (see OIA 1352862) was also commissioned by the Ministry of Education to do a literature review on knowledge-rich curriculum. Learning First outlined what makes a quality curriculum in their paper *What we Teach Matters: How Quality Curriculum Improves Student Outcomes* (Learning First, 2018). They state quality curriculum should be informed by best-practice research, including pedagogical content knowledge and effective teaching strategies. It should also be content rich or knowledge rich and specific; for example, naming civilisations to consider, not just comparing and contrasting three ancient civilisations. In addition, it should be cumulative without being repetitious or cursory and rigorously prepare students for later studies.

What is the problem with knowledge-rich curriculum approaches?

The Minister of Education has been quoted saying she was guided towards a knowledge-rich approach after reading Hirsch's book in her quest to discover why our students' results “had declined so much in PISA and PIRLS and TIMSS” (Duggan, 2025, para. 4), claiming “it changed everything ... I am now implementing huge reform in New Zealand based on [Hirsch's] book” (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). This focus on Hirsch's core knowledge, rather than powerful knowledge, could be seen as a step backwards to the lists of facts, dates, and knowledge that Hirsch promotes. Deng (2022) describes the core-knowledge approach as inadequate, promoting a vision of education based on “an unchanging canon of facts, even though the rate of knowledge production continues to accelerate relentlessly” (pp. 599–600).

The literature review from Learning First (2025) referenced 142 sources; however, only three were Aotearoa New Zealand sources: two from Pākehā academic Elizabeth Rata, and one from Education Counts which

summarises New Zealand's data in various assessments such as Curriculum Insights, Progress in International Literacy Reading Study (PIRLS), and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The other authors referenced come mainly from the US, Australia, and Europe. The review does not engage with any discussion about the foundations of “knowledge rich”; rather, it is a discussion of how a knowledge-rich curriculum should look, focusing on implementation rather than critique, ignoring Māori research on knowledge. The reliance on overseas sources is problematic because they reinforce Eurocentric knowledge systems and deprioritise mātauranga Māori.

One of the key players in the push for knowledge-rich curricula in Aotearoa New Zealand is Pākehā academic Elizabeth Rata who founded the Knowledge in Education Research Unit at the University of Auckland and has published widely on both knowledge and curriculum. However, Rata's framing that Māori culture should be reduced in schools to take Māori students “out of their minds, out of the deprived culture they live in, giving them the world, access through ideas” (researchED Netherlands, 2018) is an example of her beliefs about the inherent superiority of Eurocentric knowledge. Her research should be considered in the light of this racist framing.

Equity is often given as a key driver of the knowledge-rich curriculum. This is based on the theory that children from dominant groups do better in schools than those from minority groups, because they have acquired the codes, vocabulary, and values associated with schooling in their homes. Minister Stanford has often stated that her focus is equity—she seeks to lift Māori achievement through her changes to literacy and maths, and to the new curriculum. No one would argue that equity and raising achievement are laudable goals. However, this knowledge-rich and science-of-learning approach ignores the wide body of research that explores lifting achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, with *Ako: Critical Contexts for Change*, Berryman and Eley (2017) demonstrated significantly higher literacy and numeracy achievement in focus groups whose teachers used culturally responsive pedagogies, home and school partnerships, and strategic decision making regarding the appropriate strategies for the children. Data from kura kaupapa also suggest this narrowed focus is not the required solution, as many kura outperform mainstream English-medium schools with similar equity indexes (Cheng & Knox, 2025). Kura embed their students' culture into all parts of their education, and many of them achieved these results prior to the introduction of knowledge-rich practices.

One of the most important considerations for an Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum should be what the

important knowledge is for our children, on our whenua. One intent of the original curriculum refresh was to emphasise the centrality of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles. This wording was included in Mātairangi | The Guiding Kaupapa of Te Mātiāho. The elaboration of this kaupapa explains that the “curriculum takes its direction from Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles, particularly its provision for the active protection of taonga, including te reo Māori, tikanga Māori and mātauranga Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 1). So it’s surprising that the position paper written by the members of the Ministerial Advisory Group, Michael Johnston, Nina Hood, and Graeme Aitkin (Johnston et al., 2024) contains a section on mātauranga Māori which merely states “we need to seek advice on how mātauranga Māori relates to powerful knowledge and how it will be addressed in the curriculum” (p. 10). This paper was given to the reviewers of the draft curricula to guide their understanding of knowledge rich, suggesting no ministerial directive has been created to support the understanding of powerful mātauranga.

In a recent Official Information Act request (OIA 45519), the Ministry of Education admitted to the use of artificial intelligence to provide “background research, comparative insights and thematic analysis” (Drummond, 2025, para. 4) and to “enhance development processes across the curriculum as a whole” (Drummond, 2025, para. 2). It is important to consider the possible inaccuracy of information provided by AI tools, particularly when it comes to Indigenous knowledge.

Taken together, these issues reveal a widespread marginalisation of Māori research and mātauranga Māori. These issues show that creating a fit-for-purpose curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand is inseparable from wider arguments about whose knowledge counts, how learning occurs, and what purposes education should serve in order to avoid conflating powerful knowledge with knowledge of the powerful.

Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi through a knowledge-rich curriculum: What to consider as you work with the new curriculum

Given these tensions, educators must critically engage with future iterations of the curricula to ensure our teaching honours te Tiriti. It is clear that if you teach children, say, about the Shang civilisation, then those children will know more about the Shang civilisation than a different group of children who learnt about the Aztec civilisation. But how do we decide what the important knowledge is for our children? And how might that knowledge become transferable to other contexts? Even if we have the right

kind of knowledge for our children, how do we help them retain it, generalise it, critique, and use it? How do we support children to become questioners of the answers, not just answerers of the questions; or even to be questioners of the questions themselves?

When you are implementing the new curricula into your classroom, here are some prompts to guide you as you plan:

- How is mātauranga Māori positioned? How can you ensure that mātauranga a-iwi and mātauranga ā-hapū are taught as ways of knowing rather than cultural content?
- What are the gaps in the curriculum, and how can you address these?
- Is the content in the curriculum the most important knowledge for the children in front of you?
 - o Many of the children in your class will not choose this subject in senior school—what will they need to know by Year 10 to participate well in society?
 - o What is the learning that cannot be left to chance to ensure your children understand the ongoing impacts of colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand?
- Is there a clear conceptual framework that reflects your knowledge of the social sciences? Where can you see concepts in the knowledge and practice statements?
- How can you build on what has been learnt previously?
- How can you give children the time they need to engage with new learning?

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