

Editorial

Curriculum research for the public good

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<https://doi.org/10.18296/cm.0010>

An editorial, by nature, is subjective. The editor gets to express an opinion on a topical issue, to examine a topic from a particular perspective and to challenge or provoke thinking on an issue. A matter that is exercising my mind at the moment is the place and status of curriculum research in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. In editorialising on this topic, I acknowledge a strongly held position that curriculum and curriculum research matter (see Editorial in *Curriculum Matters* 2013). Curriculum is important. The official, formalised and legally sanctioned curriculum is important as a political statement of intention and as a component of a policy framework that shapes learning for students and the work of teachers; the curriculum in practice, developed and enacted by teachers, matters as it influences student learning and learning experiences. Curriculum research therefore also matters as it supports the making of connections between theory and practice and critical engagement with ideas and practices that directly impact learners in schools and early childhood centres, in specific subject or learning contexts and through the hidden curriculum of schooling structures and practices. But what value is given to curriculum research in the current research environment?

Inspired by the research articles in this *Curriculum Matters* collection, which address a range of curriculum issues and highlight implications for curriculum development and curriculum-based teaching and learning, I am led to query the place of this practice-oriented research in the broader research environment. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the research environment is heavily influenced by the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF), which impacts funding for tertiary education institutions. Universities in particular look to maximise their income from this fund. The broad aim of the PBRF is to reward and encourage excellent research. Among the objectives of the fund are espoused intentions to

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“support research activities that provide economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits to New Zealand” and to facilitate “knowledge transfer to New Zealand businesses, iwi and communities” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016a). This is to be achieved both through dissemination of knowledge to students and the wider community, and through the application of knowledge.

At first glance, the aims of PBRF appear to support curriculum research that is focused on making theory–practice connections and directed at informing and influencing practice. The notion that knowledge gains value in practice can be seen as an argument for curriculum research as a public good—in the generic sense that curriculum research is of value to the public, particularly the education community, rather than in the strict economic sense of a public good. However, critiques of PBRF that focus attention on neoliberal performativity in education highlight the ways in which academics and researchers are constituted as neoliberal subjects and subjected to the monitoring and disciplining forces of PBRF (Ashcroft, 2007; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015; Roberts, 2013). These critiques identify competitive pressures on researchers to perform, based on judgements of worth in PBRF, and increased individualism.

In the New Zealand performance regime, researchers are assessed based on graded individual portfolios. The most heavily weighted item in this portfolio assessment is the “research outputs” category, which is weighted at 70 percent and relates to publications and public presentations (such as take place at research conferences) that exemplify the quality of research (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016b). From soon after its introduction, PBRF was identified as problematic for teacher education and other professional fields, where valued outputs tend to relate to service to a professional community rather than to outputs of the type that are the more highly valued currency in PBRF (Middleton, 2005). In canvassing research relating to the PBRF regime, Grant and Elizabeth (2015) note that the fund has been challenged for its negative impacts on practice-focused disciplines, indigenous research and local academic publishing, and they highlight a gender gap that is connected with the scores assigned to research outputs and location of women in particular disciplines or fields. At second glance, then, there are questions about the

efficacy of PBRF in supporting and valuing research that informs practice in professional fields and communities, including teaching.

There are some contradictions in the operation of PBRF that can be seen to undermine, limit, or present a risk to the capacity of curriculum research to influence practice and contribute to a broader educational community, including teachers in schools and early childhood centres, and for the public good. One such contradiction relates to publication sources. Within the PBRF regime, there are incentives for curriculum researchers to publish in high status, highly ranked overseas curriculum journals in preference to New Zealand research journals or teacher publications, because overseas journals have higher “impact factors”, as measured by research impact metrics, and local teacher journals may not have quality assurance and peer review procedures consistent with PBRF expectation. However, if influencing practice means publishing in journals that are available to and likely to be read by practitioners, including teachers, then it can be argued that New Zealand curriculum research needs to be published in New Zealand journals that have a teacher readership. It is unlikely, I think, that the international research journals that are privileged in the PBRF regime are routinely read by New Zealand teachers as a matter of daily practice and professional inquiry.

A related tension is associated with definitions of what counts as writing and publishing. In their research on the work of teacher educators, Gunn, Berg, Haigh, and Hill (2016) highlight a dilemma for teacher educators in the reporting their research, where this reporting is interpreted narrowly as writing and publishing outputs. Research is identified as a troublesome dimension of teacher educators’ work because of the expectation and requirements to publish in particular formats or types of publications. This is problematic for teacher educators who seek to publish in the field of curriculum research, but who also have strong commitments to teaching communities and to influencing practice and disseminating research information in ways that are accessible and meaningful for teachers.

There is an irony, then, that in education, and particularly in the field of curriculum research, the mechanisms of PBRF that are intended to act for the public good by promoting knowledge transfer to communities and influencing practice appear to actually militate against these aims.

Publication and dissemination of curriculum research beyond the research community is important if it is to influence practice. Within the PBRF environment, though, curriculum research gains status in relation to the types of publication that it generates. But the types of publication that are valued within the PBRF regime are not necessarily those that support the notion of curriculum research for the public good, where knowledge is directly transferred and research disseminated within teacher communities, to inform curriculum development and the curriculum in practice in schools and early childhood centres and experienced by learners.

None of this is to say that curriculum research that gets published in highly ranked, international research journals is not valuable; nor that such research doesn't influence policy and practice. It is valuable and beneficial in helping to shape thinking and influence practice, as it is picked up over time by policy makers in curriculum reviews and practitioners in their planning for learning and daily interactions with learners. Rather, recognition of how the PBRF regime constitutes what counts as valued research invites reconsideration of the notion of curriculum research for the public good. It highlights how it is important to articulate the value of curriculum research disseminated in a variety of forms and in ways that are accessible and meaningful for teachers, and in so doing align with the espoused goals of PBRF while at the same time challenging the restrictive and limiting elements of the evaluation regime as it applies to curriculum research publication.

This collection

The authors of articles in this collection address curriculum issues in particular subject and learning areas, making connections with theory and drawing implications for practice. The ideas and practices that are examined connect with the work of teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers.

The first two articles focus on 21st-century learning and implications for curriculum development. Graham McPhail examines the discourse of 21st-century learning and argues that much of what is characterised

as 21st-century learning was adopted in music education before this discourse gained wider ground. He advocates for a balance between skills and conceptual foci in music teaching and learning. A broader implication that is drawn relates to the importance of conceptual knowledge and concern that this form of knowledge not be lost in the drive for 21st-century learning. Focusing on curriculum policy, Louise Starkey examines what should be included in a formalised curriculum to prepare the next generation of New Zealanders for a digital future. To do this she draws on research and policy literature. Advocating for explicit teaching in relation to digital knowledge, capabilities, and skills for democratic participation, she presents ideas for a broad curriculum framework to support digital learning within and across a range of learning areas.

The cluster of articles that follow examine how particular teaching practices and teacher qualities influence learner experience in different curriculum contexts. Suzanne Renner and David Bell focus on dance teaching in primary schools. In particular, they examine the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in light of their dance teaching experiences, highlighting the factors that support a small group of primary teachers who were participants in their research to feel confident teaching about and through dance. They highlight concerns about capabilities and confidence to teach dance and make dance enjoyable and meaningful for learners. Teacher self-efficacy is not equated with teaching effectiveness, but is seen as an important enabling element in giving learners opportunities to learn through dance. Similarly concerned with impacts on learners, Jackie Cowan and Ian Culpan investigate how learner self-worth is influenced by teachers. They draw on both primary teacher and learner experiences to emphasise the importance of particular teacher qualities and teaching strategies, the development of reciprocal relationships, and the use of teacher critical reflection to help foster learner feelings of self-worth. Particular attention is given to a sports education model as an illustration of opportunities for power sharing and fostering student autonomy and leadership. Focusing on teaching and learning relating to physical education at the secondary level, Glenn Fyall draws on pre-service teachers' experiences of learning biomechanics themselves and their involvement in secondary biomechanics classes to question the way

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in which biomechanics is taught. He expresses concern at a perceived disconnection between classroom and practical elements of biomechanics in schools. An argument is made for adoption of critical pedagogy in teaching and learning biomechanics and an emphasis on opportunities for secondary school students to inquire into biomechanical challenges that are meaningful for them.

In the articles that round out the collection, Robin Averill, Abby Metson and Susan Bailey report on a literature review they conducted of research and policy documents relating to parental involvement in students learning, with a focus on learning in mathematics. They identify challenges and barriers to parental involvement and disconnections between policy and practice. Despite the evidence from literature that parental involvement provides clear benefits for learners, it appears that there is some way to go to achieve greater involvement of parents. Pointers are provided to things that may need to be addressed in order to encourage wider and deeper parental involvement in support of students' learning, generally and specifically in relation to mathematics. Tanya Samu engages in self-inquiry as a New Zealand-based social studies educator and curriculum developer. She offers an example of a framework for self-inquiry and critical reflection, which she uses to highlight the ways in which her experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand have influenced her curriculum development work in other national contexts. This article invites critical reflection by readers on the ways in which their own "being" shapes and directs their thinking, work and interactions in relation to curriculum development.

Individually and together, the articles in this collection represent curriculum research for the public good, focusing as they do on implications for practice and with potential to inform policy and teaching and learning in classrooms, for the benefit of learners.

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