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New Zealand's refreshed curriculum: Another promise unfulfilled?

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NEW ZEALAND'S REFRESHED CURRICULUM: ANOTHER PROMISE UNFULFILLED?

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ABSTRACT

Art disciplines such as music have continued to be marginalised in the curriculum, due to educational policies such as National Standards that have focused solely on numeracy and literacy. With growing concerns of a narrowing curriculum, there have been several developments in education, including the removal of National Standards in 2017, the introduction of the Creatives in Schools programme and a refresh of New Zealand's national curriculum. Despite this, minimal resources continue to be allocated to primary music education, with the subject remaining underfunded and under resourced.

Keywords

Music education; policy; curriculum; resourcing; New Zealand

Introduction

Educational policies such as National Standards have continued to prioritise numeracy and literacy, often to the detriment of arts disciplines, such as music (Irwin, 2018; O'Connor & McTaggart, 2017). As a result, primary and intermediate schools have historically failed to meet the provision for music outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2016), with the enactment of the subject being described as a "tragic promise broken" (Nyce, 2012, p. 363). To restore the provision of a broad curriculum, the Labour government removed National Standards in 2017 (Wood et al., 2021), introduced a Creatives in Schools programme (Ministry of Education, 2021a) and initiated a refresh of the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2021c). Despite these developments, there continues to be minimal resources dedicated to music education, with the subject being largely absent from initial teacher education programmes (Irwin, 2018). In anticipation of a refreshed curriculum, this think piece seeks to examine the current position of primary music education in New Zealand, arguing that a refresh of the curriculum alone will not be enough to address decades of underfunding and under resourcing.

Educational policy

The decline of arts education in New Zealand has been largely attributed to National Standards (Irwin, 2018), an educational policy that set out expected levels of achievement in reading, writing and mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2009). Introduced in 2008 by the National-led government, National Standards sought to improve accountability, requiring all primary and intermediate schools to report student achievement against the outlined standards (Thrupp, 2018). However, as achievement data became publicly accessible, it was commonly used to indicate the quality of each school, influencing student enrolments as parents were seen to "shop" for the best school for their child (McMaster, 2013). To maintain student enrolments, primary and intermediate schools began to focus solely on numeracy and literacy, with subjects such as music being omitted entirely, pushed to the afternoon, or integrated to merely supplement learning in reading, writing and mathematics (Irwin, 2018; O'Connor, 2020b; Thrupp & White, 2013). Despite assertions from the Ministry of Education that National Standards would lead to improved learning outcomes across the entire curriculum, it became evident that this was not the case (Education Review Office, 2010; Thrupp, 2018).

The election of a Labour-led government in 2017 (Warner, 2018) led to the introduction of several initiatives that sought to restore access to a rich and broad curriculum, where knowledge could be developed across all learning areas (Hipkins, 2017). The removal of National Standards in 2017 was followed by the establishment of a Creatives in Schools programme in 2019. This programme created

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partnerships between independent artists and schools to deliver “creative learning experiences” within the classroom. Interestingly, this programme has been promoted to improve student well-being and possible careers in the arts sector, rather than to support the enactment of the arts curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2021a). While funding for the arts was welcomed, this programme was criticised as being a short-term solution that outsourced the curriculum and failed to address decades of underfunding and under resourcing (O’Connor & Rush, 2020; Schwalger, 2021). Given the lack of research conducted in this area, the success of this programme is yet to be determined. Alongside the Creatives in Schools programme, the arts have also been promoted as a tool to restore well-being in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (O’Connor, 2020a). Despite this, opportunities for music-making in the classroom continue to be restricted, with activities involving singing and wind or brass instruments being temporarily prohibited due to health concerns (Ministry of Education, 2021b).

Resourcing

Despite the ongoing implications of the pandemic, there have been three resources released for music over the past few years, after a decade of under resourcing. These resources include:

- Te Rito Toi
- Chase Across the Waves
- Kiwi Kid Song Collection

Released in 2020, Te Rito Toi features a collection of arts resources to promote student well-being post-lockdown (O’Connor & Estellés, 2021a). While this resource is recommended, it is not endorsed by the Ministry of Education, being funded entirely by external sources (O’Connor, 2020a; O’Connor & Estellés, 2021b). Interestingly, Te Rito Toi seems to focus almost exclusively on dance, drama and visual arts, with only one resource provided for music. In addition to Te Rito Toi, a bilingual resource, Chase Across the Waves, was also released in 2020. Based on a traditional Māori legend, this resource provides a range of music and movement activities for primary school students. This resource was funded by the Ministry of Education through the Networks of Expertise scheme (Waugh & Gain, 2020). Also funded by this scheme was the Kiwi Kid Song Collection, which was rereleased in late 2021. This song collection was distributed annually to schools for almost 20 years, before being discontinued in 2010. Featuring a wide variety of repertoire to promote group singing within the classroom (Carson & Rodgers, 2016), this resource was frequently used by primary teachers (McGee et al., 2004). While the digitalisation of the Kiwi Kid Song Collection has been a welcome development, given the scarcity of resources available for music over the last decade, a rerelease of outdated material leaves much to be desired.

Initial teacher education

A further concern is that minimal time has been allocated to music education within initial teacher education programmes, due to an ongoing prioritisation of numeracy and literacy (Irwin, 2018). Within a three-year Bachelor of Education degree, it is common for 60 points to be allocated to numeracy and literacy, equating to approximately 600 hours (University of Auckland, 2021; University of Canterbury, 2021; University of Otago, 2021; University of Waikato, 2021). In comparison, only six to twelve hours of contact time are allocated to music (Carson & Rodgers, 2016; Mansfield, 2010), with one account even suggesting that the arts were omitted entirely (Schwalger, 2021). This is unfortunately exacerbated, as most student teachers arrive with little to no prior musical knowledge, making basic tasks such as solo singing or group music-making unattainable within the degree (Trinick & Joseph, 2017). As a result, graduates commonly lack the skills and knowledge required to teach music (Rickson & Legg, 2018; Thwaites, 2011).

Refreshed curriculum

With the continuing lack of resources, training and skills for teachers to enact the curriculum, the majority of primary and intermediate students failed to make any progress in music or even meet the achievement objectives outlined in the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2016). With opportunities for music education varying significantly between schools (Chumko, 2021b), the subject has been

referred to as “in crisis” (Carson & Rodgers, 2016). While there has been no research conducted to specifically examine the cause of inconsistent curricular enactment, one possible reason may be the design of *The New Zealand Curriculum* itself (Ministry of Education, 2007). Despite being heralded for providing a non-prescriptive framework and increasing teacher autonomy (Hipkins, 2011; Wood, 2021), this document has been criticised for lacking clarity, resulting in inequitable outcomes given that it is open to the interpretation of each teacher (Tinetti, 2021; White, 2021).

Inconsistent curricular enactment is one of the issues that the refresh of the national curriculum seeks to address (Wood, 2021), ensuring teachers are given “greater clarity and guidance on what to teach and when” (Davis & Tinetti, 2021). The Ministry of Education (2021d) has indicated that the refresh of the national curriculum will be conducted in phases over the next few years, with each learning area being refreshed and piloted within schools before being further refined. According to Labour MP Jan Tinetti, the refreshed curriculum will also ensure that “important learning is covered” and “not left to chance” (Tinetti, 2021). However, with no explanation to what “important learning” she is referring to, it is unknown whether the refreshed curriculum will restore the provision of a broad curriculum or whether learning areas such as the arts will continue to be marginalised. With outcries from the arts sector, the Ministry of Education has since validated the importance of the arts, signalling that disciplines such as music would be strengthened through the refreshed curriculum (Chumko, 2021a). Ministry of Education spokesperson Pauline Cleaver clarified:

We recognise the important and unique opportunities music and the arts offer young people. We have heard the feedback from the sector that there is demand for improved arts provision in schools and will consider this as part of our planned refresh of the national curriculum. (Chumko, 2021b).

While this statement provides hope that the refreshed curriculum will address the provision and enactment of music education in New Zealand, the national subject association for music, Music Education New Zealand Aotearoa (MENZA), remains somewhat sceptical, stating that “... the Ministry has not taken ownership of, nor seems to care about, the need to improve music teaching and learning” (Music Education New Zealand Aotearoa, n.d.). With the full implementation of the refreshed curriculum not expected until 2025, it is unknown how a refreshed curriculum will address these concerns, particularly given that the arts are one of the last learning areas to be revised (Ministry of Education, 2021d).

Conclusion

With over a decade of educational policies that deprioritised music in the curriculum and gave little space for subjects outside of numeracy and literacy, it seems that the scepticism expressed above is valid. To truly improve the provision of music education in primary schools, significant investment needs to occur to create a wide range of freely accessible resources that are applicable to different contexts and year levels. While new resources such as *Te Rito Toi* and *Chase Across the Waves* are a valuable contribution, further resourcing is urgently needed. In addition to resourcing, a concentrated effort from initial teacher education programmes is needed to ensure that more time is dedicated to music and that student teachers are equipped with the skills to fully enact the music curriculum. Once adequately trained, teachers require ongoing support through professional development, rather than the promotion of programmes such as *Creatives in Schools* that arguably do little to ensure that teachers’ skillsets are maintained and developed. Until resourcing, initial teacher education and professional development are addressed, it seems unlikely that a mere refresh of the curriculum alone will improve the provision and enactment of primary music education in New Zealand. Therefore, it seems that the restoration of a broad curriculum will mostly likely remain another promise unfulfilled.

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