

Social justice and curriculum integration in a New Zealand primary school: A foundation principal's view

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Abstract

Setting up a brand new primary school is always a challenge but with limited resources this challenge is exacerbated. A model of curriculum, developed by James Beane (1997) and defined as "Integrated Curriculum", which used a democratic approach, was trialled in the new school. It was co-constructed with students and had not been previously used in a full primary school before in New Zealand. This proved to be yet another challenge. In this reflective narrative, the Foundation Principal shares her experience of the development of the model based on the principles of social justice and democracy and the unexpected results it brings.

Keywords: *Social justice; modern learning environments; curriculum; diversity*

Background theory and ideas

Democratic curriculum

Democratic models of curriculum design were first developed in the United States of America: in the first instance by John Dewey (1900, 1916, 1936) whose democratic model for education was in the Progressive tradition. Latterly James Beane's model of student-centred curriculum integration (1997) addressed issues of democracy, individual dignity, and diversity in the local classroom curriculum. According to Beane:

Curriculum integration since its inception in the 1920s was intended to mean more than overlaps or connections among school subjects which create thematic units.

Curriculum integration is a design 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 boundaries. (Beane, 1997, p. xi)

Organising themes are drawn from life as it is being lived and experienced. By using such themes the way is opened for young people to inquire critically into real issues and to pursue social action where they see the need. That inquiry and action add depth to the meaning of democracy in schools, which curriculum integration further emphasizes through its emphasis on collaborative teacher-student curriculum planning. Such collaboration also opens the way to redefining the power relations in the classroom and to challenging the idea that important knowledge is only that named by academicians and bureaucrats outside the classroom.

This article discusses the development of Beane's model in practice when trialled in a new New Zealand primary school in 2006, with particular emphasis on social justice linked to the Catholic special character of the school.

Leadership in New Zealand schools

Educational leadership in New Zealand schools has been described in a model of Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008) as the competencies that are required for 21st century leadership. The model highlights four key areas in educational leadership which are culture, systems, pedagogy and relationships. Different schools have different contexts which create their own leadership challenges, and by building relationships with the local community

principals can work with their local community to understand what they value. In a new school, this process is often fast tracked due to time constraints depending upon the initial appointment of the principal, when other staff are appointed and the length of the initial consultation process. Hearing what parents and community stakeholders value and see as benefitting children's educational future, is a key part of this consultation process. The establishment of a new school provides a great opportunity for school leaders to truly listen to all of the voices in the community and balance these with staff considerations and a strong focus on the core business of teaching, leading to the development of a unique school culture and identity. Being authentic as a principal with clearly aligned leadership practices and a strong moral purpose creates leadership that is committed to social justice.

This commitment to social justice in schools leads to inclusive practice – everyone needs to be included in the social processes in schools and educational institutions particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalised. This requires a recognition of the need to change power structures and a questioning of the validity of conservative, top down or heroic models of leadership which tend to be exclusive. Hargreaves & Fink (2005, p. 100) describe collective forms of leadership which are more horizontal in nature and that include others in leadership decisions as being far more sustainable. They call this teacher leadership and it is an effective model of power sharing, challenging the way decisions are made in schools and modelling a more equitable and inclusive, socially just process to students.

An example of this form of leadership is described by Corson (2000) in a New Zealand school and it is described as emancipatory leadership which challenges existing structures. Leaders recognise they are out of their depth in complex areas and draw on the expertise of members of the community and colleagues in order to make decisions linked to diversity or where others' interests are at stake. For example in a Board of Trustees meeting the principal tries to make their own presence a matter of small importance and withdraws from centre stage in meetings by offering their opinions last, rather than first. They commit to following through on the decisions made by the Board in a democratic way, regardless of whether they personally agree with these decisions or not.

Social justice

As a concept in education social justice can be difficult to define and when examining the literature it becomes clear that there are many versions of social justice, each with their own ambiguities and contradictions.

According to Byrne (1999) and Munck (2005), the first steps in rectifying injustice is the need to recognise the patterns, structures and traditional forms which often determine how members of society treat one another and whose voice is heard in decision making. At times these ways of doing things or deciding, create disparities in society and a lack of educational opportunity for those on the margins. For example, a significant body of research is available on poverty in the European Union examining the exclusion of students from learning processes and activities because of age, race, class, gender and sexuality (Byrne, 1999; Munck, 2005) and this issue is examined as a multi-dimensional process and one that requires institutional and systemic change. It is not merely about an individualistic distribution of goods and services but it requires an examination of the patterns and trends, and the causal factors as to why injustice in one form or another occurs.

A strong commitment to social justice and a commitment to the worth and integrity of every individual fits so well with Catholic special character and its belief in the value of human life. Gertrude Noar (1963) noted that in order to teach about freedom one must include an understanding of such great principles of democracy as the worth and integrity of every human being and the right to share in decision making.

In the context of the new school social justice is defined as advocating for inclusion by emphasising the dignity of the individual, developing a critical consciousness and emphasising student voice and power

sharing in decision making. This is done in order to change the balance of power, and it includes a stepping aside by the principal to allow others to take the reins and lead in areas of expertise or delegation. Coupled with this is a commitment to a whole school approach to behaviour management and reflective practice.

Using a narrative methodology, the principal of the new school tells the story of how the students and staff collaboratively adapted Beane's model of curriculum integration (1997) and implemented it from 2006. Reflection on the degree to which this curriculum innovation was successful and the barriers and recommendations for future use are identified.

The story

My interest and knowledge of curriculum integration first began when I was appointed as a Lecturer in a Bachelor of Teaching programme, at a New Zealand University in a four year programme which utilised James Beane's model of Curriculum Integration (1997, p. 8) as a way of preparing student teachers for classroom practice.

Year one teacher trainees were schooled in the traditional New Zealand compartmentalised model of curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1993), while year two and three students used the integrated model of curriculum developed by Professor James Beane (1997) as the basis of their preparation for teaching practice.

Attending the Innovative Teaching and Learning Conference in Invercargill in 2003 and listening to Beane himself, as well as observing his wife Barbara Broadhagen in action while working with a randomly selected group of local students, was a fascinating experience. This began to whet my appetite to read and study more about this innovative model. As an educator and teacher myself of over twenty years I was fascinated by the enthusiasm, focus and attention the children gave to Ms Broadhagen and the way in which she questioned and challenged them in this lesson.

Observing students at the University grapple with the concept of increased student choice in curriculum (which is central to Beane's model) and attempting to relinquish power as the teacher, along with ongoing discussion and debates with my colleagues, all added to my fascination with this democratic style of learning. The fact that this model was not in use in other New Zealand primary schools at the time, coupled with where New Zealand was politically, meant that innovative localised models of curriculum design were being encouraged by the then Labour government. This meant the time was right for further exploration.

The opportunity to put this knowledge into practice, arrived in December 2005, when I was offered the chance to set up a brand new school. The school was situated in the South Island of New Zealand in a small rural setting, in a stunning town of just five thousand people. The main industry was tourism, water sports and skiing, giving it a multinational flavour and attraction to international visitors.

Flexible learning environment

The school was to be a blue skies development, built by the Catholic Education office, with its own special Catholic character. It cost four million dollars and was crafted in traditional local stone with mobile walls of triple glazed glass so that learning spaces could increase or decrease as the need arose for flexible classroom spaces. The physical design and layout was pivotal to providing the flexibility required for an innovative learning environment.

The buildings were T shaped and this provided three classrooms off each pod with a central collaborative working space in the middle which had a sink and storage areas for more "messy" activities. Classrooms could be opened or closed to fit with the various learning tasks that the children were involved in; for example in the afternoons the classrooms tended to open the doors and enable children to take a laptop and research in various areas including the open middle collaborative space in the building. Cross grouping

occurred across various curriculum levels for literacy and numeracy and this enabled students' greater individualised learning opportunities and flexibility, rather than a more traditional approach to curriculum delivery. It also encouraged a team approach to planning and teaching.

As it was a new school there was a significant amount of professional development for staff working together to discuss curriculum benchmarks, ways of assessing, recording information, learning support and problem solving when challenges arose.

The main challenge with the physical layout of the school was the time it took to build, because the building programme tended to lag behind the growth in the school and at one stage the new library had to be converted back into a classroom to keep pace with roll growth. The other significant challenge was fund raising to maintain progress with the furniture and equipment needed to keep up with growth and new resources required on the journey. However, the Board was very supportive and worked hard to come up with novel approaches to raising funds.

The school began in 2006 with two classes and myself as Principal, and fortunately one of the University graduates of the Bachelor of Teaching programme I lectured in was appointed as an initial teacher in the school. As it was a brand new school, the Establishment Board Chair and I met several times prior to my commencement in the role of Principal to begin to plan the way forward for the school. Of particular relevance was the model of curriculum that we should use: should we try the traditional compartmentalised model in use in most New Zealand schools or utilise the opportunity to try something different and creative?

In keeping with the vision of the school and the blue skies thinking, the Board were keen to trial something new in the area of curriculum, and when I explained the Curriculum Integration model to them and my desire to see if the theory worked in practice, it was agreed we would use Beane's model (1997) for the school. The other classroom teacher who was employed had been working for many years experimenting with models of inquiry learning, and increased student voice, and found that this Curriculum Integration model provided what she felt was a logical next step.

Connection to theory

As in Beane's model of Curriculum Integration (1997), the model used with the children was student designed, (in that the children had the power to make decisions about what they studied via co-construction). They were asked to suggest questions they wanted the answers to about real life problems and then they voted as a small group over the next few days to narrow this study question down, and then each group came back to the class and voted again until there was agreement within the class about the specific questions to be answered in their study. The areas studied were generated from students' personal and social concerns, by asking the following questions:

- What questions/concerns they had about the world, or about themselves?
- What did they wonder about?
- What kept them awake at night?

These questions were grounded in the concept of democratic education (Beane, 1997, p. 50) with all students having one vote on what they should study and the teacher also having one vote ensuring that all voices were heard. In this way the values of social justice and equal rights began to develop. Beane's model which included personal and social integration skills as well as a focus on democracy, dignity and diversity (2005, pp. 8-9), lent itself nicely to what staff were trying to achieve.

Subject matter from the local context (personal integration) formed the initial basis for the children's studies as there was much to do and set up, and as the surrounding environment was very beautiful, it lent itself to environmental exploration in an integrated way.

Curriculum integration in practice

The model of Curriculum Integration needed to be explained carefully to the parents of the newly enrolled children and the students once they began. This occurred by way of a number of initial parent meetings explaining the process of curriculum integration coupled with examples of children's work in the school newsletter. On several occasions the school was opened up in the afternoon or evening for parents to come and look at the stages of the process in action which were detailed visually on classroom walls.

Students began to use the model by being encouraged to ask questions which formulated the first stage of the model. Questions included their wonderings about the world around them, the impact of people's actions on the environment, global warming, world poverty and what they could do to help solve issues in these areas (social action), based on some of their concerns.

Other skills such as social integration began to emerge in students through opportunities to demonstrate citizenship and school values, by working collaboratively in groups and developing increasing self-discipline. The teacher worked as a facilitator to enable students to follow through on their studies and to integrate areas such as literacy and numeracy into what they were studying. Whilst there was a national curriculum in New Zealand, the environment politically was one which encouraged schools to introduce their own autonomous flavour into curriculum design. Students understood through the use of a "pizza model" that there were effectively eight slices of national curriculum they needed to eat / partake of in any one year, so integration was needed to incorporate other curriculum areas not just focus on one in particular, for example, social sciences.

Community involvement was encouraged and sought via a range of community experts. These people were invited to talk with students where it was relevant. This meant that networks and connections were established locally, leading to an increase in the profile of the school. This resulted in a growing presence in the community and increasing roll growth.

Evidence of the development of democratic citizenship and entrepreneurialism increased in the students over time. One savvy seven year old suggested her group offer pocket money to pay other children to vote for their question at the initial voting stage. This indicated an appreciation of the power of the vote and this student's understanding of the level of control at this stage of the process. Teaching staff realised that some children very quickly grasped the notion of democracy and the power of the vote and the freedom this gave them in their learning.

Social action became an integral component at the end of each unit studied by the students, demonstrating to them the power they can have to be change agents in society, better citizens and create long term benefits for others in a socially just way. Five year olds reaching out beyond themselves to sponsor a child (who was not as fortunate as they were) clearly demonstrated increasing levels of social justice and an awareness about others in the world. This was evidenced through the clear living of the values within the school and children's willingness to help out in the community. Middle school students demonstrated social action by cleaning up the lake front and planting trees, which demonstrated their citizenship not just to staff but to parents and others outside the school.

Children with special needs began to gravitate to the school due to the welcome they received from others and the family values in the school. One severely autistic child came to the school for two years and then joined his sibling at a neighbouring school when his parents felt he was ready to cope in this bigger, "scariest" environment. One child was overheard telling another in the playground that "we saved xxx so he could join his brother!"

Catering for diverse nationalities was evidenced in the fact that there were over 30 different nationalities in the school, and whilst one would expect a significant number of Māori or Pasifika students in a New Zealand school, this was not the case. There was one Māori student, no Pasifika students but many students

from Australia, America (North and South) and Europe as well as parts of Asia. Welcome signs at the door in all of these languages and days where national costumes were shared and foods from different nations sampled all added to the culture and respect for diversity in the school.

Respecting others was a key part of the school ethos which was based on the notion of treating others as you want to be treated, and the fact that while at school, students understood the need to work together and support one another as they would in a family or a team. There was a strong focus on inclusion in the school and involving everyone, no matter who they were.

The flexible learning environment and innovative child centred model of curriculum design meant that children's interest was captivated in their learning. Learning outcomes were not only more effortlessly achieved but many children went beyond what was expected of them in comparison with their peers in the learning outcomes that they achieved. Along the way they developed research skills and the ability to critique their own and others' work in the form of self and peer assessment.

Over time, community stakeholders increasingly understood and owned the curriculum integration process, as they began to see the benefits in the lives of their children. Weekly newsletters from the school (which were also given out at the library / church and available online), explained what the children were studying. Each term an invitation was extended to parents, grandparents and friends of the school to attend a gallery walk of the classroom where the children took their families / other visitors around the school and explained to them what they were learning. This developed greater social and communication skills in the children and an understanding that they were ambassadors for the school.

Displays of children's work were on the walls all around the school, with explanations of what they were learning and what they had discovered, so that any person entering the school could see the curriculum integration process in action. The media were invited into school events regularly and relationships were built with local reporters who promoted the school to the wider community. Fortnightly assemblies run by various classes provided children with an opportunity to showcase their work and speak in public. These were student run rather than teacher led.

Teacher reports and feedback to parents helped them to understand the process of curriculum integration and realise the benefits it brought to their children and the authentic learning opportunities provided. Self and peer assessment models involving students' feedback to one another became a regular feature of assessment processes in the school. Students were taught how to constructively critique others' work and at the time these types of assessments were not widely used in New Zealand, so the principal was invited to share at two workshops run by the Ministry of Education to over 130 principals and teachers in nearby regions.

As a safeguard to ensure the national curriculum was being covered, staff worked hard to develop a model of curriculum coverage where they tracked back (over the course of a year) the questions studied by students and the curriculum areas these fitted. Toward the end of the year if there were gaps in curriculum coverage these were met by deliberate teaching in particular areas to ensure the national requirement of a broad and balanced curriculum was met. The principal then took this information one step further and developed it into a matrix of coverage at beginning, middle and senior school levels to ensure students were not repeating content areas over time. This became a most useful piece of information for the staff team to reflect on and utilise in forward planning.

Towards the end of 2008, there was a change in government in New Zealand resulting in the introduction of a set of prescribed national standards in literacy and numeracy. A strong focus on key competencies and core skills needed for the workplace emerged and the notion of local autonomous curriculum models was effectively replaced by a national standardised model. This had the effect of undermining the freedom to implement a child centred individualised approach to curriculum. External pressure and a range of accountability measures in government determined priority areas began to emerge and these have increased markedly since then.

The implementation of national standards also began to impact on teachers' time and creativity and on students' freedom to develop, research and answer their own questions and integrate various curriculum areas into their research. "Going with the flow" or following where the journey leads in the development of this model of curriculum integration was therefore severely hampered by the introduction of national standards and testing and a prescriptive external environment. It had the effect of diminishing local autonomous models of curriculum design due to the external pressure of providing results for national standardised tests.

Benefits and opportunities of the model

The benefits of adopting the Curriculum Integration model were that student development needs were met by providing greater intellectual challenge enabling students to work at their own level with a greater sense of power and control over what they studied. Student initiated projects, particularly fundraising and ideas to reach out beyond themselves, also seemed to be increasingly prevalent. A group of five year olds decided to fundraise each month, to sponsor a World Vision child, middle school children set about cleaning up the shores of the nearby lake, while senior students wrote to the City Council about the introduction of traffic lights in a busy intersection in the town as part of developing their research and problem solving skills, which emerged from asking these questions.

The unexpected upshot of this model of curriculum integration over the four year period as principal in the school, was that minimal time was spent working on behavioural issues with children and most of the time was focused on learning. Roll growth from twenty-six pupils to almost one hundred exceeded Ministry expectations and there were zero suspensions, stand downs or expulsions. This fact in itself indicates the high level of interest and motivation in the children and this was an unexpected positive spin off from the curriculum integration model.

Greater flexibility in what students studied, how they studied it and how they presented their work including the way it was assessed was another benefit they experienced. An increase in students' power and control was provided via student voice and contribution in decision making including the assessment design required, albeit self, peer or group assessment. Older students were taught the skills of constructive feedback and encouraged to peer mark other students' work alongside the teacher. Self and peer assessment models were utilised more regularly than in many other schools according to feedback provided by a Ministry of Education assessment adviser in 2009. Effectively students were involved at every step of the process and had a voice at each level. This in turn enabled students to feel greater ownership and increased critical consciousness, providing them with a depth of insight which enabled them to exceed expected learning outcomes for their age.

Challenges and barriers to implementation

The challenges in any new school development project are many and varied. For the first four months, the school was held in the local Catholic Church buildings as the initial pod of buildings was not yet built. Ongoing building throughout the first three years of the school and development projects in the school created health and safety management challenges but also opportunities for student involvement where possible. Senior students researched playgrounds in the region and then worked in groups to submit adventure playground designs with the whole school, staff and students voting on the final design for installation. Student leaders oversaw the development of edible gardens and a worm farm, and families donated trees in memory of loved ones.

The implementation of a new model of curriculum design required a significant amount of time to develop particularly where children's voice and ideas were included. Substantial marketing to stakeholders and extensive scaffolding for children was required as this was a new model they had not previously used. Staff were involved in additional professional development to work together to determine how this new theory would actually work in practice at the classroom level.

One year after commencement when the external educational auditors (Education Review Office) visited they were critical of the fact that the model of curriculum integration was not fully developed. Staff explained that as it was a new model it was evolving and that this was the nature of the process. On their second visit three years later however, the auditors were extremely complimentary, once the model was further developed and more robust documentation was in place to explain the development of the model, its theory and practice. The fact that curriculum integration with a democratic approach was a new and innovative model and not pre planned by teachers, was a challenge to the way things had “always been done” in the New Zealand education system, and change when first introduced often creates critics.

Conclusion

Giving students choice and freedom in what they learn and how they learn it paid dividends in this school in unexpected ways, allowing increased time and focus on teaching and learning, greater learning achievements by students and decreased time spent on student behaviour management by the teachers and principal. When surveyed in 2009 about this model of integrated curriculum, children described it as “the best education ever”, others’ said they “learnt so much” and that there was “fun in their learning”.

Students were highly motivated and challenged in their learning as well as being involved in every stage of decision making. They found that they had power and control over what they learnt and relished this opportunity to use the power of the vote, at times in creative ways with placards and payment, to ensure they learnt what they particularly wanted. The model helped students to recognise positive and intrinsic rewards by providing students with a sense of agency in their learning and in wider society through an understanding that they can be agents of social change. A strong commitment to social justice was evident in the social actions of the students working to assist others both within the school through inclusion and respect towards each other. This extended beyond the school to the local community, through fundraising and involvement in activities to improve the environment around them and the plight of others.

As a staff, though new to this design and possibly naive purists, obstacles were negotiated and problems solved so that issues such as curriculum coverage and how to integrate to ensure the national requirements of a broad and balanced curriculum were easily overcome. Staff worked together closely and developed into a team where each worked according to their strengths using a more horizontal model of teacher leadership.

After four years as principal the school was in great heart, the roll had quadrupled and staff had a clear understanding of the curriculum integration model which had been developed together. There was a strong ethos of commitment to child centred learning and the value and integrity of each individual child. Time spent on learning was maximised and students were motivated and working on task for most of the time and producing results at higher than expected levels for their age. This was the unexpected result of giving children an increase in power and choice in their learning and it worked to enhance their academic resilience and self-efficacy.

Recommendations for others

The findings in this new school show that democratic designs for curriculum integration in local contexts are meaningful and relevant to children and young people, and have the capacity to significantly enhance the value and impact of their learning experiences. In the process, the democratic design of Beane’s model of curriculum integration (1997) allows otherwise contentious issues of social justice, inclusion and multiculturalism to be successfully tackled. Beane’s model can be adapted to meet the needs of young children in the first years of schooling. In particular, children aged 5-7 years are capable of collaboratively negotiating the content of the curriculum as long as this process is adequately scaffolded and that this model of curriculum integration can be successfully implemented across an entire primary school. As a principal I would strongly recommend Beane’s Curriculum Integration model (1997) as one which enables students to increase their awareness of and

commitment to social justice, and gives them the chance to become far more involved, motivated and successful in their learning achievements. Flexible learning environments complement this type of innovative curriculum development superbly, providing flexibility in structure, spaces and teaching methods.

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