

Curriculum Overreach

How a special interest group took over
the refresh of the New Zealand curriculum

By Bevan Holloway

Background

Education in New Zealand is highly politicised space. When the Labour government took power in 2017 they undertook a wide-sweeping review of the system, running a series of meetings across the country with a diverse number of stakeholders and interested parties in an attempt to find a way to address some of the serious concerns the sector had. The previous 8 years had seen the introduction of National Standards for years 0-8 in 2010, which had the effect of narrowing the curriculum and coincided with a significant drop in New Zealand's PISA scores, especially during the early stage of its adoption. Prior to that, a new curriculum (NZC 2007) had been introduced that brought to the fore values and key competencies, devolved to schools autonomy to contextualise and personalise learning, and was less prescriptive than previous iterations. It is not unreasonable to say the potential of this document was lost with the focus of the sector being on the adoption of National Standards.

One outcome of the reviews undertaken by the Labour government was to refresh NZC 2007. A wide range of stakeholders have been involved in this work over the last four years, from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), curriculum experts from our universities and teachers and school leaders from a range of cultural and socio-economic contexts. The refreshed curriculum was shaping up as being representative of our culture, history and communities, and was well founded in educational theory and research. It sought to strike a balance between progressive ideas about student-centred learning and the local autonomy required to enable that, with nationally directed expectations around content and research about effective practice.

Still, the politics persisted, with the New Zealand Initiative (NZI) being a leading dissenting voice. For instance, in 2018 they partnered with ResearchEd for a festival, held at Auckland Grammar School, intended to “reignite evidence-based education in New Zealand”. Speakers included Katharine Birbalsingh, famous for being the UK's strictest head-teacher, Michael Johnston and Elizabeth Rata. In 2020 they published a report called 'New Zealand's Education Delusion: How Bad Ideas Ruined a Once World-Leading School System' which placed the blame for our declining achievement levels squarely at the feet of “an experiment in child-centred orthodoxy”.

So, when in the 2023 election the National Party's education policy was titled 'Teaching the Basics Brilliantly', a policy heartily endorsed by Michael Johnston (who had joined the NZI in March 2022), many in the sector were worried about another politically driven lurch in education policy and a return to the era of National Standards. Those worries became stronger when National was able to form a coalition government with two right-wing parties, New Zealand First and ACT.

What follows is a timeline of the machinations that have occurred since, particularly with reference to the Ministerial Advisory Group. The information came to light thanks to an OIA request made and shared by the New Zealand Association of Teachers of English. You can access all the documents on their website, [at this address](#).

The documents show how a small group of ideologically aligned individuals, most of whom had worked and collaborated together previously, were able to take over the refresh of the curriculum. Their takeover has resulted in most of the work of the hundreds involved in the refresh process over the last four years, including Ministry in-house expertise, being discarded. In the case of English, which has been the primary focus of the efforts of this group, five have rewritten the learning area. That group have stretched the bounds of Public Service guidelines in order to achieve this.

Our curriculum is a national document that sets the regulatory framework for how teaching and learning is to happen in a school. Therefore, we should expect it to be developed according to Public Service due process, which includes specific guidelines around the procurement of those involved in its development. We should expect its development to be wide ranging, consulting with and drawing on the needs and experience of stakeholders across the sector, draw on expertise and, ultimately, reflect our place and people. None of that has happened since the formation of the Ministerial Advisory Group. It was happening prior to it.

I see three phases in this story. The first phase, which runs from late November to mid-February, see the Ministry and the Minister engaging in a back and forth as the scope for the the Expert Group is defined. The Ministry is keen to keep it limited and position the advice it will give within the existing curriculum refresh programme, I assume trying to avoid another tumultuous season of change for the sector and honour the work of the experts involved to date. The second phase runs from late February to late April. During this phase it becomes clear the Ministerial Advisory Group have been pushing the bounds of their scope, starting to write documents for the curriculum, something Public Sector guidelines explicitly state those groups are unsuited to. This is pointed out a number of times during this phase (ie, writing documents for the curriculum is the work of government) but is ignored by the Group and, ultimately, the Minister. We see a tussle for control of the writing process between this Group and the Ministry, with the Group clearly of the opinion they are the ones in charge. It is during this phase that we see unease surface in the Ministry. The final phase is where the Group gets everything it wants and begins writing the English curriculum. The Ministry has, essentially, been reduced to a procurement centre.

It is, in my mind, a clear case of bureaucratic takeover¹ by a special interest group. Regardless of whether you agree with their education ideas, their actions are a threat to democracy and we should be alarmed by the ease with which they have been able to achieve it.

¹ Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa writes about this in Appendix 2.

November and December: a new government

Ministerial Briefing Note (MBN), 26 November

The Ministry of Education (MoE) acknowledges the Minister intends to appoint an “Expert Group” and says they “are ready to work with you on the terms of reference” and “wish to confirm the intended scope of curriculum changes indicated in ‘Teaching the Basics Brilliantly’”. Our understanding is that you wish to add in year-by-year detail into the curriculum, rather than undertake a complete redesign”.

They propose a way for the Expert Group to operate within the current programme of work: to provide oversight and advice.

Ministerial Briefing Note, 27 November

The MoE attempts to frame the curriculum changes to date as being suitable for the working in of National’s education policy. “We understand your priorities are to rebalance national direction and local flexibility.”

We’re onto it already, the MoE says, giving detail about their intent with the refresh:

“Work has already begun to move New Zealand’s curriculum and associated assessment and aromatawai settings towards stronger national direction while still maintaining balance with local flexibility ... changes underway include stronger national direction on what needs to be taught, when, and effective practices that all teachers and kaiako need to use.”

However, it is stated this rebalancing does not go as far as “centrally setting a highly detailed teaching programme” because to do so would be a “significant departure from evidence about the value of enabling and expecting the profession to respond to individual learners needs and interests”.

The Ministry recommends building on or amending the “work undertaken to date with experts and the education community to maintain the momentum and buy-in that exists.”

It is pointed out they have established within the MoE “Te Poutāhū | The Curriculum Centre² ... to provide leadership on curriculum”. In what becomes an important point later, the MBN says “The national curriculum sets regulatory expectations³ for teaching and learning”.

² In the proposal to cut 550 jobs from the MoE that is released in April 2024, 197 of them are in this Centre.

³ As becomes clear, because this work is anchored in legislation it is the job of government only - in this context, the MoE. There are policies that explicitly state this is not the work of ministerial advisory groups. Concern about the ‘drift’ of this MAG into this space is clear in the emails.

Ministerial Briefing Note, 4 December

It is clear a lot of discussions have been had. Of note in the MBN are the following:

- “You have indicated that you want the Expert Group to be established as a ministerial advisory group.”
- “We understand that the intention is not for the Expert Group to review the refreshed curriculum framework, but to advise if the content in the learning areas should be strengthened.”

The Ministry proposes a framework for the operation of the Expert Group:

“... they could deliver you an initial report on matters within scope by the end of February 2024. This would enable the curriculum developers to draft the redesigned curriculum content for testing ... We would check in with the Expert Group as work is being developed. The Expert Group could then provide quality assurance and recommend on implementation supports by June.”

A proposal for what is not within scope is set out, in a clear attempt to preserve the ethos and key elements of the refreshed curriculum:

- a. reworking the progression model
- b. reworking the purpose statement of each learning area or the Understand, Know, Do structure of the learning areas
- c. redesigning the two learning areas [English and maths] and developing granular descriptors
- d. reworking the pedagogies of the refreshed NZC ... and draft common practice model.”

The Ministry provides a list of 12 names as potential members of the Expert Group. Short biographies are provided for all. Michael Johnston’s one reads: “Involved in developing the National Standards and the NCEA literacy and numeracy co-requisite. Has also held academic positions at Victoria University. Is currently with the New Zealand Initiative.”

Four of those on this list make the final Group. The person they recommend as chair does not make the Group, even though, in making the case for them, the MoE says they have “strong experience chairing groups that are bringing diverse perspectives together to reach agreement on the best path forward in a curriculum and assessment context. [Redacted] also has previous experience working at a ministerial advisory group level”.

You are appointing 12 members as part of the Group:

Name	Membership
Michael Johnston	Chair
Barbara Ala'alatoa	Member
Christine Braid	Member
James Chapman	Member
Melissa Derby	Member
Fiona Ell	Member
Gaven Martin	Member
Elizabeth Rata	Member
Audrey Tan	Member
Iain Taylor	Member
Lorraine Taylor	Member
Helen Walls	Member

The Annex tables attached to this MBN provide lists of names and organisations that have contributed to the work on the curriculum refresh. The list is extensive: NZCER, all our universities, school leaders, teachers, consultants. Out of all those names, only three that make it onto the MAG are found in this list: Christine Braid, Fiona Ell, and James Chapman.

It seems the MoE is doing all it can to demonstrate the rigour, evidence base and process behind the work done to date on the refresh of the curriculum.

Ministerial Briefing Note, 6 December

Final details regarding the Expert Group are found in here, and it is clear the Ministry's attempts to frame the scope have failed. We have the first mention of the science of learning and indication of the general thrust of the changes the Minister is after:

"We have amended the purpose and scope for the ministerial advisory group, following your feedback. You asked to include a review of the refreshed English and maths⁴ learning areas, common practice model⁵ and phase by phase guidance⁶ to consider how they reflect the science of learning and how they work together to provide teachers with the clarity needed on year-by-year teaching expectations".

⁴ The MoE had these out of scope in the previous MBN.

⁵ The MoE had this out of scope in the previous MBN.

⁶ The MoE had this out of scope in the previous MBN.

Ministerial Briefing Note, 20 December

The Expert Group has been approved by Cabinet now. This MBN provides specifics about who, their contracts, the Group's (MAG) Terms of Reference (ToR) and scope. Michael Johnston is the chair. Only four of the MoE's recommendations have made the 12 comprising the MAG. Of the 12, eight have collaborated or worked with Michael Johnston previously, some of them often, either in academic research, think tanks, formalised 'forums' (eg, [Open Inquiry](#)) or other education advocacy work (eg, [webinars such as this one](#)): Elizabeth Rata, Melissa Derby, Amy Tan, Iain Taylor, Christine Braid, James Chapman and Helen Walls.

The ToR state the MAG's purpose, and this is important because it becomes something that is contested later on.

"The primary purpose ... is to report to the Minister on the English and mathematics and statistics learning areas in the first three phases [ie, up to Year 10]. This may include advice, feedback or, where appropriate, draft new or alternative material for the Minister to consider in the learning areas or any of the documents in scope."

There is a specific lens through which this is to be looked at, and the lens reflects fully the advocacy of Michael Johnston:

"The advice needs to consider the science of learning, urgency about progress, and explicit and intentional teaching."

Once this work is finished "the Minister will decide which of the recommendations to progress further." – keep that in mind when we start to look at the actions of the MAG.

The scope is significantly wider than the MoE wanted initially. Only two matters are out of scope now: the Understand, Know, Do structure and "advice on the specific provision of services contracted out by the Ministry".

The statement about what is in scope, says the MAG is to provide advice on:

"... how the refreshed English and maths learning areas, common practice model, and phase by phase guidance work together to provide teachers with the clarity needed on year-by-year teaching expectations and how they embed effective practices that reflect the science of learning. This would include providing advice on changes required .. and anything else identified as needed. This may include advice, feedback or, where appropriate, draft new or alternative material for the Minister to consider in the learning areas or in any of the documents in scope."

It seems it is open season on the refreshed curriculum and all the work done on it over the previous four years. But even then, as the emails released show, the MAG finds it difficult to remain within the ToR.

By the end of February the MAG is to deliver an initial report “on matters within scope”. That report “will be used to provide direction for the curriculum developers to draft the redesigned curriculum content ... The Ministry will check in with the Group as the work is being developed ... The Group will provide quality assurance ... and make recommendations on implementation supports by June 2024.”

This is important. The ToR draw distinct lines between the work of the MAG and curriculum development as a result of the MAG’s advice. The emails, and subsequent actions of members of the MAG, show this is not adhered to.

January and February 2024

Meetings the Minister had during this time, either with MAG members or people connected to them, are as follows:

- Tim O’Connor, principal of Auckland Grammar School, 26 January, 3:30 to 4:30. This is the only school the Minister meets with in January.
- Michael Johnston, MAG Chair, 21 February, 10:30 to 11.
- Oliver Hartwich of the NZI, 28 February, 3:30 to 4.

Apart from a withheld email thread between the members with the subject “Culturally responsive instruction” between 19 and 30 January, there is nothing released in the documents that shows what the MAG did during the period leading up to the release of their report on 19 March 2024.

13 February

10:48am. In an email to Anya Pollock, Chief Advisor to the GM Strategy and Integration at the MoE, asking for an extension to the report’s due date, Michael Johnston says the following: “Thus far, we have been operating on the understanding that writing the documents is within scope for the MAG. The ToRs enable us to provide “advice, feedback or, where appropriate, **draft new or alternative material** [bold in original] for the Minister to consider ...” I need to make sure that we will be able to do that without running afoul of mandatory processes. Does material written for the Ministry always have to go through a procurement process?”

5:41pm. Anya replies. Her email has the tone of something that has been intentionally crafted. It begins:

“The first distinction is the role of Ministerial Advisory Groups, which is to provide independent advice directly to Ministers”.

She makes clear the MAG needs to be careful of not straying into blurring lines between its role and that of the MoE: “This is different to the role of departments, which is to provide free and frank advice to ministers, implement their decisions and generally ‘do the work’ of government.”

Then, for the sake of any doubt, she writes: “Creating regulations (which is what the national curriculum is and also the intended status for the common practice model) and providing resource and tools to schools is part of the work of government.”

What she writes next makes it clear the MAG have begun writing curriculum content, and this has been the topic of a conversation between Michael Johnston and Anya, perhaps others. She directly addresses the question in Michael’s email:

“The ToR’s scope enables the MAG to provide sample content for the Minister’s consideration. As discussed yesterday, MAG members will need to be aware that any such sample content will be considered ‘freely given’ ... You may like to consider how much effort you put into producing sample content yourselves, versus providing advice to the Minister on the changes to existing content or new content needed that could then be progressed through usual government processes, with the MAG providing independent oversight and ‘quality assurance’ that the products reflect its intent (as much as that is agreed to by the Minister).”

How can we read that as anything other than ‘Get back in your lane’?

She ends with this: “Note that where further work is progressed on the recommendation of the MAG, it may become difficult to manage perceptions of conflict of interest were members then to participate in any procurement processes.”

10:32pm. Michael’s response to Anya is four sentences long, and includes this: “I’ll give careful thought to the implications for the work of the MAG.”

March 2024

Meetings the Minister had during this time, either with MAG members or people connected to them, are as follows:

- MAG, 6 March, 5:15 to 5:45 (virtual).

- MAG, 12 March, 7 to 8 pm.
- Nina Hood, Education Hub, 13 February, 2:45 to 3:15.

15 March

12:06am. In an email sent by Michael Johnston to all members of the MAG and cc'ing Anya Pollock, it is clear that in his mind all the concerns expressed in the February email exchange with Anya are no longer relevant:

“I met with several Ministry officials today, including Anya, to plan the project ahead.”

What could that project be? The MAG has not yet released its initial report for the Minister's consideration.

Nevertheless, that is no obstacle, because things are moving apace and “timelines for stages will be mapped out ... the Ministry will provide a project manager to coordinate our efforts.”

They are clearly in content writing mode, with Michael saying that “we will also organise the additional help we'll need with the writing ... We will have strong input into who these people will be. Please provide me with names.” In Michael's mind, the MAG has clear control of this project.

Michael is “going to get in touch with (redacted) to find out exactly what detail the Minister would like to see in the report. I think it may be more important to get a revised draft to the Minister than to wait”.

Remember how the MAG's ToRs drew a distinction between the work of the MAG and curriculum development as a result of the MAG's advice? The MoE will send a memo to the Minister two days after the release of the report reiterating that distinction. But to Michael, that distinction is now gone: their report has not been released, the Minister has not responded to its advice and already the MAG members are starting the process of putting teams together to develop the content for the curriculum, no doubt building on the work they did while in the advisory phase.

19 March: Release of the MAG's report

This is a lengthy document and it is worth reading because it gives a clear indication of the MAG's position regarding children, research and their definition of the science of learning⁷.

⁷ I asked Guy Claxton if he was happy to provide some context around the science of learning, a phrase that the MAG build their case around and something the Minister is very keen on. You will find what he has to say, based on decades of experience in that field, in Appendix 1. All the bolds are his.

Children, it says on page 20, “are novice learners” and so “an incremental approach that builds on their existing knowledge and skills is fundamental to managing cognitive load ... an important part of the learning process: the retrieval of knowledge and skills stored in the long-term memory” (p.31).

With regards to the evidence-base, “The MAG will consider only studies that use quantitative measures of learning, preferring those with psychometric properties that have been shown to be valid” (p.33).

In terms of their recommendations, they advise that The Common Practice Model and all sections of the curriculum “should open with sections describing ... key concepts from the science of learning ... For example, the concepts of working memory, cognitive load and schema should all be included” (p.19).

On page 21 there is a section called ‘Preparation of documents’. Here is its advice to the Minister: “The MAG recommends that the Minister authorises the MAG to draft the in-scope documents for testing in schools, with support from suitable experts. The MAG would also like to be involved in the post-testing process (reviewing and responding to feedback).”

So, the solution to the problem they faced when they started drafting content and got told they were overstepping the ToRs by Anya Pollock is to use the report to advise the Minister to authorise them to draft the content. And remember, pretty much anything about the curriculum up to year 10 (and even that gets transgressed soon) is in-scope, aside from the Understand, Know, Do structure.

21 March

Ellen MacGregor-Reid sends a Memo to the Minister seeking “your agreement on the next steps in response to the initial report of the MAG”. Of note in this memo are the following points:

- “The initial report recommendations are framed as the MAG undertaking much of the work. We are recommending some differences in how the work is delivered from those recommendations.”
- (Notes the MAG ToRs were updated in January 2024 but I cannot find these.)
- “We are proposing that the Ministry works alongside the MAG, and other expertise ... to undertake the development work.”
- “There may be some MAG members who want to be involved in the actual writing of the curriculum content. We propose ... we contract the ... on a separate contract from their MAG work ... [so] we can manage conflict of interest and Intellectual Property risks ... [there’s a]

clear delineation of the role of the MAG ... We continue to be aligned to Public Service Commission guidance on the role of ministerial advisory groups, which says they are unsuited to regulatory roles⁸ and that they should not undertake activities that cut across the responsibilities of the Minister or the departmental chief executive (which the writing of the curriculum would fall into).”

Remember, even during the MAG timeframe they were in curriculum writing mode.

26 March

An email is sent from Lauren Foley of the MoE to colleagues Derek Lyons and Carolyn English, plus two redacted individuals, perhaps attempting to wrestle control of the composition of the writing groups back. “... this is the proposed list of names” she writes. All are redacted, from which I conclude none of them ended up in the writing groups.

April 2024

2 April

12:51pm. Elizabeth Rata emails Michael Johnston, Melissa Derby and two other redacted individuals. The subject is ‘English Writing Team Planning’. Attached is the planning for a team meeting at 3:30pm that afternoon.

3 April

7:47am. Melissa responds to Elizabeth’s email. She is, she says, “in all the right spots” on Christine’s document (withheld). To Elizabeth she says, “happy to discuss my involvement in the English documents”.

9:02am. Elizabeth replies: “how about a phone chat at 4? We should know more by then.” And then she asks Michael about whether a “meeting is likely for Monday April the 8th”.

4:43pm. Michael sounds despondent in his reply: “There are no meetings scheduled at present. I’m not entirely sure where the establishing project is at, or when the Minister will formally respond to our report. However, given the timeframe, I think we should get on with the work in the meantime.”

Just sit with that for a moment. They are progressing with getting things set up to start work on curriculum content without Ministerial authorisation.

⁸ Remember that the curriculum, and thus the writing thereof, falls under this and that the MAG have been cautioned about the writing they have done already.

Writing Team Members

- Elizabeth Rata (Lead Writer)
- Charles Laing (Head of English AGS) Years 9 and 10
- Charlotte Forster (Auckland Grammar AGS) Years 9 and 10
- 9(2)(a)
- Audrey Young (St Cuthbert's) Years 7 and 8
- 9(2)(a)
- Callum Baird (Manurewa Intermediate)Years 7 and 8
- Reviewer – 9(2)(a)
- 9(2)(a)
- Melissa Derby (QA)

This is the team that will rewrite the English learning area over the following three months, basing their work on the recommendations of the MAG. So much for all the work done by a vast range of experts over the previous four years. Note that Melissa Derby is the sole QA at this point, although this shifts being ERO once they are officially underway.

5:56pm. Anya makes this point in her email: “can you please not do anything further until the Minister has formally responded and we have everything set up for the writing teams.”

6:45pm. Elizabeth replies: “Oh dear, - I wrote to 3 of the 7 members of the English Writing Team (EWT) today to invite them to join. I’m speaking to them individually by phone tomorrow to sort out dates. I’ll say that we need to wait for the contracts but we do need to get the dates sorted.”

6:59pm. Elizabeth sends through the English writing teams names to Anya and the other MAG members (ref image). Note the composition. It’s not exactly a representative sample.

4 April

8:51am. Anya, for the second time, cautions the MAG.

“I’m sorry, I thought Derek would have made it clear that the Ministry needs to run the process of establishing the writing groups.⁹ I don’t want you to fall foul of government processes for establishing these sorts of groups, including procurement rules and the processes we need to use when engaging people ... can you please wait until we have instructions from Derek before contacting anyone else or having further discussions with the people you have already contacted ... We don’t yet have the authorising environment in place to be inviting people onto groups or discussing potential contractual arrangements.”

9:37am. Elizabeth replies, asking for “holding lines” asap but holds firm:

⁹ In an interview with Kathryn Ryan on Radio New Zealand on 12 June, the Minister will say that the writing groups have been put together using the Ministry’s usual processes.

“I need to set arrangements in place before they go on holiday - several of them will be overseas so for the teachers and their schools the sooner we can get things organised the better.”

1:14pm. Michael chips in, supporting Elizabeth’s position. There is no doubt in his mind who is in charge here:

“I’m at the NZ Initiative retreat ... I understand that it’s the Ministry’s job to put together the writing groups, but they need to do so in consultation with key MAG members. In the case of subject English, that means Elizabeth. I’m also getting seriously nervous about lost time. We need to get going fast!”

5 April

11-11:30. The Minister is at the NZ Initiative retreat to speak during the morning tea break.

3pm. An email with the subject ‘MAG letter’ is sent to Ellen MacGregor-Reid and cc’ing Georgia Huisman, which is the Minister’s formal response to the MAG report. The Minister agrees to recommendation 1 related to the common practice model, is giving thought to the checkpoints and phases, and agrees to all the other recommendations. The email says the Ministry has been “asked to urgently establish a series of curriculum writing groups to enact your recommendations” and notes the Minister is “delighted that several members of the MAG wish to contribute to these sprint groups over the coming months.”

Note: these groups are basically already ready to go.

5:29pm. They have the authorisation they assumed they would get. Elizabeth doesn’t waste a moment. She sends an email to the MAG members: “I’m pleased to say that I’ve had informal chats with the English teachers. This unofficial preparatory work means that we have the teachers, workshop dates, and venue ready¹⁰ to go as soon as the Minister’s preparations are completed and arrangements can become official.”

10 April

Lauren Foley emails Derek Lyons with the proposed make up for the writing groups. “We have used most of the suggestions from the MAG and additional people that we have identified”. She states they are following EOI processes “which looked at cv/bios to ensure we are meeting criteria” and this had been done for most writers except for “the suggestions that we propose to include from Elizabeth”. For these, they “will need to receive a bio ... to assess against the criteria.”

¹⁰ The venue is Auckland Grammar School.

Note that Elizabeth is already operating the English group in an “unofficial” capacity, but she is yet to follow MoE procurement processes.

17 April

A proposal to cut 550 roles at the MoE is announced, including 197 in the Curriculum Centre, which was the place identified in the MBN of 27 November created to “provide leadership on curriculum” as part of the curriculum refresh.

22 April

1:51pm. An anonymous MoE staffer sends an email to a number of redacted individuals, with the subject ‘procurement of writers’. It is an email that suggests a significant level of concern at the MoE with the process, or lack of it. I have included the email in full, but some lines deserve highlighting.

- “Today I was starting to feel uncomfortable with the work I was doing for the procurement of the new writers”
- “I would prefer to not work on this and be put on a different piece of work”
- “... it seemed to be quite difficult to find justification for some of the writers who were proposed to be hired”
- “I started to feel concerned about the risks around this ‘opt out’ procurement process we were looking to run.”
- “I don’t know if we are contracting these people on merit.”
- “I feel I would not be acting in a responsible or trustworthy manner in accordance with our code of conduct sections 4 and 5”

5:48pm. A colleague thanks the sender for their “honesty and integrity on this”. It seeks to outline some relevant procurement advice, and in its summary ends with “this procurement is doing many things at the same time. Consequently, there’s no single clear-cut pathway. The best we can do is put forward a (procurement) plan. From there, it’s up to management to approve or decline that approach and wear those risks.”

23 April

8:13am. That procurement plan, we find out the next morning in an email, is still not completed. Once it is it “will be sent for approval” which it requires from 6 managers. “Honestly, this will take a lot of time; we have no control over how long that takes. Please don’t be tempted to send the Agreements to suppliers ahead of time. There’s always a risk that the plan won’t be approved.”

From: 9(2)(a) <[redacted]@education.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, April 22, 2024 1:51 PM
To: 9(2)(a) <[redacted]@education.govt.nz>; 9(2)(a) <[redacted]@education.govt.nz>; 9(2)(a) <[redacted]@education.govt.nz>; 9(2)(a) <[redacted]@education.govt.nz>
Subject: procurement of writers

Hi all,

Today, I was starting to feel uncomfortable with the work I was doing for the procurement of the new writers for the science of learning, maths and English writing groups. I took a pause to look through some of our legislation and speak with other team members. I asked 9(2)(a) to give me time to pause for this purpose. I have outlined my concerns below and just thought I should let you know in case you have any other information... or think I may be overreacting needlessly. I'll let 9(2)(a) know that I would prefer to not work on this and be put on a different piece of work until I am confident that we are doing the right thing.

- While writing the procurement plan, it seemed to be quite difficult to find justification for some of the writers who were proposed to be hired. This was not provided to us for this piece of work and today I went to some of our experienced team members and 9(2) to try fill in the gaps. Nobody could provide adequate information. Given this, I started to feel concerned about the risks around this 'opt out' procurement process we were looking to run.
- Section 12 of the Public Service Act [Public Service Act 2020 No 40 \(as at 01 March 2024\)](#), [Public Act 12 Public service principles – New Zealand Legislation](#) in particular part b which outlines that appointments must be merit based. As we are not running our normal writer recruitment process, I don't know if we are contracting these people on merit.
- In the procurement plan, we say, "*The Ministry seeks to direct sources the SME's (listed below) as an Opt-Out Procurement, as per Rule 12k of the [Government Procurement Rules](#)". **Public services:** The provision of certain types of health services, education services and welfare services.' With the limited information I have, I do not understand if this actually justifies this work.*
- Without clarification, I feel I would not be acting in a responsible or trustworthy manner in accordance with our code of conduct sections 4 and 5 [Responsible - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#) if I continued to write the procurement plan and contracts.

May

Elizabeth's team holds curriculum writing workshops at Auckland Grammar School this month.

6 May

She sends through the first report through to the Ministry. "The first two workshops were a great start to the project. Given such a start, I'm confident that we'll have the year 7 - 13 English curriculum written by the end of June". And they are moving with "speed and efficiency. Two programmes written in two days bodes well for completing the English curriculum by the end of June."

Years 11-13 were never in scope. On what basis, and whose authority, are they now part of this work?

Why is the curriculum being called a programme?

11 May

The second report goes off to the MoE. On agenda for the workshop is that the first report is to go to ERO on 6 June.

Elisabeth emails to ask for an extension into June, saying, “We’ve realised that it’s just not possible to write more than one programme a day. I don’t think we can be more efficient than we are. We’re working as a well oiled machine!” She wants four more days to complete the writing of the curriculum.

May 20

The English writing group have written the following:

- Curriculum introduction
- Grammar Year 7-10
- Grammar Year 11-13
- History of New Zealand English Year 7-10
- History of New Zealand English Year 11-13
- Literacy Analysis Year 7-10
- Literacy Analysis Year 11-13
- Poetry Year 7-10
- Poetry Year 11-13
- Popular Stories and Libraries Year 11-13
- Traditional Stories Year 1-10
- Traditional Stories Year 11-13
- Dramatic Works Year 7-10
- Dramatic Works year 11-13
- Novel Year 7-10
- Novel Year 11-13
- Shakespeare Year 7-10
- Shakespeare Year 11-13
- Short Stories Year 7-10
- Short Stories Year 11-13
- Vocabulary for describing tone mood or atmosphere
- Vocabulary Lists - From Academic Headword List
- Vocabulary Year 7-10
- Vocabulary Year 11-13

June

Elizabeth's English writing team continues its work at Auckland Grammar School.

12 June

The Minister is interviewed on Radio New Zealand. In that interview she says, among other things:

- “The MoE have used a criteria that they always used to pick people for a writing group.”
- “The MAG recommendations ... I've said thank you very much. That work is now finished”
- “The MoE have now gone and put writing groups together which are quite separate from the MAG ... they've used their own processes ... I didn't even know who the people were until just recently ... and they're now putting together some ideas ... they've only just started writing”.

Closing questions and observations

How is Michael Johnston a suitable candidate to lead the MAG? The first piece of big national education work he was involved in – National Standards – was a failure. He has no ministerial advisory group experience. The latest piece of education work he has been involved in – the NCEA co-reqs – looks designed to fail vast swathes of students. He has not been involved in the refresh work. He works for a right-wing think tank.

The final makeup of the MAG has the perception of being unduly influenced by Michael Johnston, with eight having clear, sustained professional working relationships with him.

The MAG ToR state this is not a representative group, instead drawing on expertise required. However, the expertise they bring is narrow, ideological, and, in the case of their claims about the science of learning, outdated, misguided and unscientific.

At what point did they begin writing the curriculum? There is the real possibility they did so in contravention of policy regarding ministerial advisory groups.

Can the MoE really be said to have put together these writing groups according to their usual procurement processes, as the Minister claimed in the radio interview?

In the early days it is clear the MoE is trying to build a case for the refresh to carry on with a few tweaks, and to frame narrowly the focus of the MAG. Why was that advice disregarded, along with all the expertise that had been drawn on to date as part of the refresh project?

Is not the writing work done by the team formed by Elizabeth Rata exactly the kind of work Te Poutāhū | The Curriculum Centre was established to do? Why not use them and all their expertise, and use the MAG in a QA capacity, as originally set out?

How did the MAG manage to subvert procurement process and sidestep in-house MoE capability and set up the teams that would rewrite the curriculum?

Appendix 1: The Sciences of Learning and the Practice of Teaching

Guy Claxton, August 2024

Professor Guy Claxton is a cognitive scientist with a ‘double first’ in Natural Sciences from Cambridge University (MA) and a Doctorate in Experimental Psychology (Psycholinguistics) from Oxford University (DPhil). He has been Professor of The Learning Sciences at the Universities of Bristol and Winchester and is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and the UK Academy of the Social Sciences.

This statement is an updated version, as of August 2024, provided for the purposes of supporting this report, of a blog which may be found at www.guyclaxton.net.

There is much argument about learning, the practice of teaching and the purposes of education. Here is a handy “crib-sheet” of some of the areas of contention and misunderstanding.

There is no single agreed ‘science of learning’: that’s why senior academics in the field like myself are typically styled Professors of the Learning Sciences plural. The Learning Sciences (LS) constitute a hybrid discipline comprising experimental psychology, social and affective neuroscience, cognitive anthropology, developmental psychology, robotics and AI, neurology, systems theory, sociocultural studies, embodied cognition, philosophy of ethics and epistemology, school-based research and many others. Empirical studies of schools constitute one small corner of this territory. What is broadly termed ‘cognitive science’ comes in many shapes and forms: **there is no generally accepted core of knowledge that is ‘the science of learning’**.

The subfield of cognitive science called ‘information processing’, which sees learning a purely intellectual activity framed in a language that talks about the storage in memory of information in the form of propositions, is on the way out as a field of academic study because it takes no account of the neurodynamic, attitudinal, social, emotional, embodied and cultural factors that play a major, if often invisible and unsung, role in every moment in every classroom. Its root metaphor of the mind as computer is flawed and misleading. The simple computer-based model of Working Memory and Long-Term memory was formulated in the late 1960s and is long past its sell-by date (except apparently in dwindling bubbles of cognitive and educational

psychology). **To adduce information processing research as support for didactic teaching is unscientific.**

A particular case in point is the idea of ‘cognitive load theory’ (CLT) which derives from information processing psychology. The primary aim of CLT is to explain why some students find learning some things hard, and to derive teacher actions from this explanation. There are a host of reasons why a child is apparently struggling with a particular learning task, that may reflect preoccupations with emotional matters in or out of school, lack of interest, the ‘work’ being too easy and boring, or its difficulty (for a particular class) being misjudged, the desire to appear rebellious to peers, and so on. **To leap to narrow cognitive explanations without taking account of these and many other possible factors, is facile, unscientific and counterproductive.**

Science cannot tell you what you should do; that is the realm of philosophy and ethics. Science can only tell you what is possible or likely given certain values and aims. To claim to infer an Ought directly from an Is is a schoolchild error.

It follows that **there is no such thing as ‘good teaching’**, only teaching that is good for certain purposes or outcomes. For example, if all you are concerned about is scores on relatively superficial tests of reading ability, mathematical computation or factual retention, then there is a good deal of research that shows that explicit or didactic teaching - that which maximises Explanation (by teachers) and minimises opportunities for Exploration (by students) on the grounds of ‘efficiency’ - is perfectly good. If, however, you also value (note: in addition to, not instead of, ‘knowledge’) the cultivation of character strengths such as curiosity, independence, imagination, critique, collaboration or intellectual humility, then different kinds of teaching are needed. Indeed, **relentless ‘explicit teaching’ may well stunt the development of the very strengths that are often espoused by recent curriculum reforms in many countries.**

Any kind of teaching can be done ‘badly’. Explicit teaching can be dull and disengaging, just as inquiry-based teaching can be unfocused or pitched inappropriately. It is intellectually lazy to promote a ‘good’ version of one by attacking a ‘weak’ or caricatured version of the other. In reality, **the craft of teaching mostly involves a judicious and dynamic mixture of both explanation and exploration**, depending on a whole variety of factors (prior knowledge, subject, purpose, age, aptitude, mood etc) to which good teachers are sensitive and responsive (see John

Hattie's work). **To try to enforce a single template is bad education and bad science.**

The distinctions between “biologically primary and secondary knowledge” and “novices and experts”, which are often used to justify a didactic approach to high-school teaching, are entirely specious and betray an extraordinarily simplistic view of teaching and learning. Different kinds of learning abound and differ in a host of ways. Learning how to drive a car, sing a Mozart aria or bamboozle parliament are not “biologically primary” but cannot be achieved by didactic teaching. Deeply understanding differential calculus is not the same as being able to perform certain calculations correctly and neither simply depends on having “stored information in long-term memory”. Novice and expert are not distinct categories but denote different stages along multiple dimensions of learning. To try to base whole systems of education on such binary nonsense is not just specious, it is seriously damaging.

In general, **polarising and opposing Black and White versions of teaching simply betrays a lack of familiarity with the vast amount of high-quality hybrid and nuanced “dispositional teaching” that is already happening** in many states and many countries. To trash these innovations through dogmatism, wilful ignorance and cherry-picked research is intellectual vandalism.

Part of the problem is that **much of the cited research derives from work on high school maths and science teaching. These subjects are not valid prototypes for younger children, other subjects on the curriculum or indeed for the many wider forms of out-of-school learning.**

Another part of **the problem is the gullibility of politicians, administrators and some educators in the face of authoritative but ill-informed claims to scientific warrant by a small but vociferous posse of academics and consultants.** Many of these people have no qualifications in the sciences of learning, and a very limited and highly selective understanding of the field. As such their claims on our attention are unwarranted. **A little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing.**

To deepen understanding of current thinking in the sciences of learning see, for example:

- Guy Claxton, The Future of Teaching and the Myths that Hold It Back
 - Stanislas Dehaene, How We Learn
 - Alison Gopnik, The Gardener and the Carpenter
 - Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton, New Kinds of Smart
 - Kirke Olson, The Invisible Classroom
 - David Perkins, Making Learning Whole, and Future Wise
 - Ron Ritchhart et al, Making Thinking Visible
 - Yong Zhao, What Works May Hurt
-

Appendix 2: Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa gives some context about the takeover of the curriculum refresh

Very good reading for those in New Zealand from Bevan Holloway - How a special interest group took over the refresh of the New Zealand curriculum. I had the privilege of reading through this before it went up, & have some thoughts about what's noted.

What Holloway highlights, based off OIA requests, is very concerning. It eerily, and directly maps on to what I've recently highlighted as the far-right's theory of political change, now entrenched in NZ incl. at highest levels of Govt.

<https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2024/07/22/novichok-for-the-mind-the-far-rights-theory-of-political-change-in-new-zealand-through-podcasts/>

I have 5 related points.

1. Holloway shows how a small group of highly motivated ideologically aligned folk, through the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG), captured the curriculum refresh. This mirrors the far-right's (long-term) strategy, & desired end state of cultivating a "counter-elite" to support political movements.
2. The MAG effectively, & strategically bypassed the Ministry of Education's usual processes, and expertise - incredibly wresting control of curriculum writing directly. This echoes the far-right focus on gaining control of bureaucratic positions, & levers of influence, beyond elected offices.
3. The MAG disregarded the work done over the previous four years on the curriculum refresh, effectively dismantling the existing structure. This aligns with the far-right's interest in challenging existing power structures rather than working within an established liberal-democratic system.
4. MAG used rhetoric around "science of learning" and explicit teaching methods to shape discourse. This reflects the far-right's strategy of using rhetorical tactics, self-serving narrative farming, and media control to shape public opinion - in a manner favourable to achieve desired end states.
5. The curriculum refresh takeover represents, as Holloway stresses, a *fundamental shift* in educational philosophy and practice. It's designed to/will have an intergenerational impact. This mirrors the far-right focus on gradual institutional capture, beyond electoral moments, & term limits of govts.

Holloway's thankless work to trawl through the OIA docs around MAG's work - shaping the attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, & mindsets of NZ's tamariki, & rangatahi - would be really good to feature in some MSM coverage. This work matters.