Thoughts on Curriculum and Assessment from a New Zealand teacher in London

Introduction

I am a New Zealand trained science teacher with more than 20 years of teaching experience in New Zealand and another 10 years' experience as an assessment facilitator. In April 2017, I decided to take up a new challenge and move to the UK where I am now teaching science at a boys' prep school in North London. I have been teaching here in London for a full school year and return to school in September as a part time science teacher and head of data, assessment and reporting. I have always had a keen interest in data and assessment and my time working at Evaluation Associates developed not only my interest but also my skills in analysis and reporting of assessment data.

I want to try and describe the curriculum and assessment principles and practices of the English primary school system, from my experience here in London and compare it with New Zealand practices, providing my own opinion on the differences. My limitation is that I currently work in a boys' prep school which is a private school and not bound by national education requirements but hopefully I can still offer some useful insights. In the time I have been here I have learnt a lot about the national system in England for all schools and so I will also focus on Years 4-8 which is where I am currently working but will include Reception to Year 3 to provide the bigger picture.

Curriculum

The government of UK website states that:

> *The 'basic' school curriculum includes the 'national curriculum', as well as religious education and sex education.*
> *The national curriculum is a set of subjects and standards used by primary and secondary schools so children learn the same things. It covers what subjects are taught and the standards children should reach in each subject.*
> *Other types of school like academies and private schools don't have to follow the national curriculum. Academies must teach a broad and balanced curriculum including English, maths and science. They must also teach religious education.*
> https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum

These first three points describe some of the key differences between English and New Zealand curricula. I have been struck by the prescriptive school curriculum here in every area. Using science as an example, I can see what I should be teaching both for content and working scientifically at each year level.

An example for science content is: that pupils should be taught to -

> 'name and describe the main parts of the digestive (year 4), musculoskeletal (year 3) and circulatory systems (year 6); and describe and compare different reproductive processes and life cycles in animals (year 5).'

This is described in full detail in the national curriculum. As a New Zealand trained teacher, I was a little horrified by the prescriptive nature of the science curriculum when I first started teaching here. I was used to the broad New Zealand curriculum where each 'world' has statements that show progressions through each curriculum level but with no compulsion to teach any topic at a particular year level or in any of the detail described here in England. I now have a better understanding of why my English trained science colleagues in New Zealand were so focused on organising content at each year level. In New Zealand, we have spent a lot of time in every school deciding which topics should be taught at a particular year level, often making decisions by considering how complex the topic is and whether we think the students are mature enough to understand it. I found, in my years of

teaching science in New Zealand, that each school has a similar science curriculum, but topics are taught in different years and to different degrees of complexity. The problems I now see with this system is that every science department must go through a process of deciding what is best for their students based on their collective knowledge and opinion. If a teacher changes school, they need to adapt to new schemes of work. If a student changes school, they will find that they will redo some topics and have missed out on others. This is very unlikely to happen here in England unless a student changes school within a school year.

The real advantage for teachers that I see with the English curriculum is the availability of a large range of excellent resources. As topics are described at each year level, then age appropriate resources are designed by many different providers. When I plan a unit of work here, I look at resources from BBCbitesize, Brainpop and Brainpopjunior, Tigtag etc. Videos, games, questions, teaching strategies and teaching plans are all supplied on the websites. Many of the resources are aimed at the students so they can work on topics at their own pace and at their own level without a large amount of differentiated planning by the teacher. The kids love going online to do a quiz, watch a clip to improve their understanding and so on.

Assessment

Measuring student progress in England is a very different system from New Zealand. There are a number of high stakes statutory assessments at primary level. If you check out the **Appendix - Key Stages** you will see that currently there is testing at Reception, end of KS1 and KS2 (Year 2 and Year 6). The National tests at KS1 and KS2 are statutory and include testing in English reading, grammar, punctuation and spelling and mathematics - arithmetic and reasoning. SATs (Standard Assessment Test) at Year 6 help to determine the type of school that students will go to next. Secondary school in England starts at Year 7.

Since the summer of 2016 updated SATs tests have been introduced to reflect the new curriculum of 2014. Students now receive a scaled score instead of levels. It was felt that the previous levels (similar to NZ curriculum levels) were too vague, and the scaled scores allowed for differences in difficulty of tests from year to year so more accurate comparisons were possible. For KS2 the scaled scores range from 80 – 120 with 100 being the expected score for a pupil at the end of KS2.

Teacher assessments in English reading, writing, mathematics and science sit alongside national tests and are currently statutory.

Writing is assessed by teachers and, following the removal of levels, interim teacher assessment frameworks were introduced in the 2015-2016 academic year, to enable schools to report statutory end-of-key stage teacher assessment. These frameworks were designed to assess whether pupils have a firm grounding in the national curriculum by requiring teachers to demonstrate that pupils can meet every 'pupil can' statement, in order to achieve a standard. This aimed to achieve greater consistency between teacher judgements, and to avoid pupils moving on in their education with significant and limiting gaps.

Consultation and change since 2017

There is, however, change on the horizon for some testing in England. In March 2017, the government launched a consultation process on primary assessment in England. The consultation ran for a period of twelve weeks until the end of June. Over 4000 responses were received and many of these represented larger organisations such as local authorities, early years professionals, headteacher organisations and schools. The latest consultation process involved government sending out a set of

questions, collating responses from every individual and group and describing what could be done. The Government consultation response was produced in September 2017, three months after the consultation process closed.

Some of the government responses to the assessment consultation are very interesting, especially in light of what is currently happening in New Zealand with assessment. Here are some of the main findings and changes:

- Ensuring that Early Learning Goals are clear and align with KS1 (particularly for literacy and maths). They will also reflect the latest evidence on child development and predictors of future attainment. Strengthening the teaching of literacy and numeracy in early years is essential.
- Moderation, both internal and external should remain. Better training will be provided to help teachers with moderation.
- Government will consider how to address workload for teachers – gathering data dominates class time, meaning less time for effective teaching. The data appears to serve little purpose. Government is now clarifying requirements for evidence as well as exploring ways to use online tools.
- Government is now looking at a new baseline assessment at Reception (5 year olds). The purpose is to establish prior attainment as a starting point for measuring progress to the end of KS2 (Year 6). The baseline assessment will focus on English and maths and self-regulation eg persistence with a task or following multi step instructions. The assessments should provide a narrative (formative information) to help teachers identify pupil needs – strengths and weaknesses. This Reception baseline data will only be used seven years later to measure progress at the end of primary school (KS2, Year 6). It is not to be used as a judgement of pupils or schools
- Progress measures at the end of KS1 (Year 2) will become non-statutory as the baseline assessment moves to Reception (summer 2022).
- KS1 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests have been non-statutory since the 2016-2017 school year, but government still provides resources to aid teaching of these skills. A multiplication tables check is likely to move to the end of Year 4 (matching curriculum expectations). These tests will be online, with offline availability. Trials are occurring in the upcoming 2018-2019 school year and will be statutory in the 2019-2020 school year.
- New SATs tests with scaled scores were introduced in 2016. Sitting alongside these national tests have been the statutory obligation for teachers to carry out teacher assessment in English, reading and maths. Government responses to the consultation process mean that the obligation for teachers to carry out assessments is no longer statutory from the upcoming school year 2018-2019. Teachers are still required to report progress to parents from ongoing formative assessments.
- While teacher assessment frameworks provided in 2015-2016 school year seem to be working for English, maths and science there are problems with writing. The consultation found that the descriptors were too narrow, and a more flexible approach was needed. Government agreed with this and immediately began looking at ways of improving the frameworks. In other subject areas, teachers have asked for a longer lead time before new assessments are introduced but with writing, they asked for more immediate change. Consequently, updated and more flexible frameworks for writing were produced for the 2017-2018 school year (just completed) and exemplars are being produced for the upcoming year. Government are also closely monitoring work being done by “No More Marking”. Their website is included here. https://www.nomoremarking.com/

- At the same time that this Consultation report was produced by the government, they consulted on the recommendations made by the independent Rochford Review of statutory assessment arrangements for pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests. I will not comment on this report here but it makes interesting reading.
  Primary school pupil assessment: Rochford Review recommendations - government response

My reflections on what New Zealand should and should not consider:

Consider how the New Zealand curriculum is structured.
Why was it designed to be so flexible? I am not so sure of the advantages now that I have worked with the English curriculum as NZ's seems to have increased workload for teachers. Maybe there is currently too much variety in the delivery of the curriculum. I also wonder if schools who have a higher number of experienced teachers will therefore deliver a better thought-out curriculum. I believe that a more considered curriculum, designed by a variety of experienced teachers, could have advantages for students across New Zealand.

Consider the provision of resources.
Websites such as Brainpop and BBC Bitesize provide teacher and student resources at every level. They are outstanding and offer a variety of resources to use for teaching and learning in class and for students to use to help clarify, understand and practise new learning in a variety of ways. As we know, students learn in different ways and I always provide a variety of resources that students can pick and choose from. It is possible to use things like YouTube, Khan Academy etc but the resources provided by Brainpop and Bitesize are tailored for kids at specific ages.
Another good example of useful resources is CGP books https://www.cgpbooks.co.uk. These books are also written for many subjects at all levels and have questions, ideas, puzzles etc that students can work through with direction or at their own pace.
The important thing about English resources is that they are custom-made for content and ideas at each year level. Without a more structured NZ curriculum, these types of resources would be difficult to produce.

Consider the way New Zealand carries out consultation on curriculum and assessment changes.
One of the things that strikes me is the different approaches to consultation between here and in New Zealand. Consultation here seems to be short and sharp and immediate concerns are addressed within the year. In New Zealand there seems to be a lot of time put into setting up ministerial advisory groups and then reference groups that have representatives for every type of organisation. It would be interesting to understand the NZ government's thinking around the consultation process. Looking in from the outside, as I am currently doing, it seems that we feel the need to ensure that every group is represented, and their voices heard, and we go out of our way to make this happen. Here, in England, there are so many different groups that they are consulted as part of the population, not as targeted groups.

Do not consider national testing at primary school in New Zealand.
Testing in Year 6 seems to cause a high amount of stress for both students and parents. Year 6s at our school are monitored carefully for signs of stress and given dedicated pastoral support. There are also a large number of online resources, so students can practise the tests. Whether these resources are helpful or increase the stress levels is debateable, but it is sad to see such young students – 10 and 11 year olds - trying to cope with the pressure of these tests. The fact that New Zealand has no statutory testing at primary level is, in my opinion, a very good thing. So much time, effort and money are put into producing resources that help students to pass these tests. Teaching to the test, at all year levels, seems to be inevitable here, for at least part of the school year.

Consider providing suitable resources to help teachers measure student progress

The good thing about assessment here in England is the enormous effort that is put into providing clarity about and resources for what needs to be taught and how this can be best assessed. My planning feels more focused and better differentiated than when I was in New Zealand. The types of assessment designed for primary students also seems to be more useful to identify needs. For many topics in science, we have no formal tests, we use written work and presentations given in class as well as homework assignments. Open homework is popular here – where students can decide on any topic around a them such as 'exploration and discovery' and present their work in any way they wish. The variety and depth of research and presentation allow easy differentiation on all sorts of levels.

Another good example of a way to measure progress is the new writing resources, for example using the 'nomoremarking' website. I have had a look at this assessment and it seems to have some very useful ideas. But I'm not really a primary writing teacher!!

Resources for assessment, in all areas of the curriculum, are numerous, allowing teachers to think about what they want to assess and then find something that suits their needs.

Consider how to address workload for teachers in New Zealand

Government consultation in England seems to genuinely try and address teacher workload. One of the key changes they are currently making is to reduce statutory testing. Teachers feel the time taken to collect data means that there is less time for teaching, a sentiment I know that is shared in New Zealand. I am pleased to see that National Standards are no longer used as a way of reporting progress in New Zealand primary schools and I am aware that resources are being put into helping schools to find ways to measure progress while the students continue to learn. Three of my considerations above all help to reduce teacher workload by providing excellent resources so that every teacher or school does not have to reinvent the wheel. It is the variety of assessment and curriculum resources that impresses me here. I can always find something that I think will be useful to suit my teaching and my students' learning. Perhaps this variety is the result of a much larger population here but I wonder if some of our resources are still too focussed on assessing rather than on next steps for learning.

Consider or maybe do not consider collecting standardised baseline data at start of school

The English government is currently considering moving statutory testing from KS1 to collecting baseline data when students start school. The purpose is to establish prior attainment as a starting point for measuring progress to the end of KS2 (Year 6). The baseline assessment will focus on English and maths and self-regulation eg persistence with a task or following multi step instructions. There is a guarantee that this data will not be used to compare pupils or schools. The purpose is to find out students' strengths and weaknesses when they start school so that the teaching can be focused on each student's needs. This seems like a very good idea as children do not all start school with the same amount of knowledge or skills. It would also mean that schools could look at the progress they are helping students to make, using measures chosen by the teacher and/or school. In theory, I believe this could be a useful idea but, of course, the fear is that someone will try and use the data for comparative reasons.

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Appendix: Key stages

The national curriculum is organised into blocks of years called 'key stages' (KS). At the end of each key stage, the teacher will formally assess your child's performance.

Age	Year	Key stage	Assessment
3 to 4		Early years	
4 to 5	Reception	Early years	Teacher assessments (there's also an optional assessment at the start of the year)
5 to 6	Year 1	KS1	Phonics screening check
6 to 7	Year 2	KS1	National tests and teacher assessments in English, maths and science
7 to 8	Year 3	KS2	
8 to 9	Year 4	KS2	
9 to 10	Year 5	KS2	
10 to 11	Year 6	KS2	National tests and teacher assessments in English and maths, and teacher assessments in science
11 to 12	Year 7	KS3	
12 to 13	Year 8	KS3	
13 to 14	Year 9	KS3	
14 to 15	Year 10	KS4	Some children take GCSEs
15 to 16	Year 11	KS4	Most children take GCSEs or other national qualifications

Key stage 1 and 2

Compulsory national curriculum subjects at primary school are:

- English
- maths
- science
- design and technology
- history
- geography
- art and design
- music
- physical education (PE), including swimming
- computing
- ancient and modern foreign languages (at key stage 2)

Schools must provide religious education (RE) but parents can ask for their children to be taken out of the whole lesson or part of it.

Key stage 2

Your child will take national tests in May when they reach the end of key stage 2. These test your child's skills in:

- English reading
- English grammar, punctuation and spelling
- Maths

  The tests last less than 4 hours. You'll get the results in July. The school will send you the results of your child's tests and teacher assessments.

Key stage 3 and 4

Key stage 3 (Y7-9)

Compulsory national curriculum subjects are:

- English
- maths
- science
- history
- geography
- modern foreign languages
- design and technology
- art and design
- music
- physical education
- citizenship
- computing

Schools must provide religious education (RE) and sex education from key stage 3 but parents can ask for their children to be taken out of the whole lesson or part of it.

Key stage 4 (Y10-11)

During key stage 4 most pupils work towards national qualifications - usually GCSEs.

The compulsory national curriculum subjects are the ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects.

Core subjects are:

- English
- maths
- science

Foundation subjects are:

- computing
- physical education
- citizenship

Schools must also offer at least one subject from each of these areas:

- arts
- design and technology
- humanities
- modern foreign languages

They must also provide religious education (RE) and sex education at key stage 4.