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Citation: Neill, C., Belgrave, M., Oliveira, G. 2022. Consulting the Past: Creating a National History Curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. *PublicHistoryReview*, 29, 128–141. <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v29i0.8216>

ISSN 1833-4989 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj>

ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Consulting the Past: Creating a National History Curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand

Carol Neill*, Michael Belgrave, Genaro Oliveira

Corresponding author: Carol Neill, carol.neill@aut.ac.nz

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v29i0.8216>

Article History: Received 03/06/2022; Accepted 08/11/2022; Published 06/12/2022

The Politics of a National History Curriculum

Developing new national history curricula tends to be politically controversial. This is hardly surprising, as a national history curriculum is a political document. As Wils and Verschaffel's exploration of the Belgian 'history wars' put it, debates over the history curriculum illuminate tensions between 'the field of education, the world of politics, and... academic historians'.¹ A new curriculum attempts to revise the historical consciousness of a society and give it an official imprimatur, all of which inevitably entrenches present and often contested values in an understanding of the past. These processes also reflect broader social contests. Debates over cultural politics in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States and Canada have contributed to the development of 'history wars' and polarised conflicts between conservative understandings of the past, which emphasise nation building and progress, and broadly postcolonial interpretations, which focus on slavery and colonisation and their impact on indigenous peoples. This debate has become so heated in the United States that state legislatures have intervened to prevent schools and teachers from teaching 'critical race theory', to the increasing concern of historians and teachers alike.² This article assesses the public impact in Aotearoa New Zealand of the introduction of the new curriculum, following the surprise announcement by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in September 2019 that it would now be expected that 'all learners and ākonga are aware of key aspects of New Zealand history and how they have influenced and shaped the nation'.³ In looking at the responses of teachers, academic historians, the community at large and politicians, we attempt to explain why the Aotearoa New Zealand debate has so far been professional rather than polemical.

Given the increasing influence of cultural politics elsewhere, developing the new curriculum had the potential for sparking some form of history war over its content and objectives. This was particularly so given that the new curriculum was clearly to have postcolonial overtones, in that it made Māori history a significant, if not predominant, focus. Moreover, the Prime

Minister made her announcement at the unveiling in Parliament of a plaque commemorating the New Zealand Wars and just prior to the observance of the first national day to mark that conflict, Te Pūtake o te Riri, He Rā Maumahara.

There were two curricula developed, one for Māori medium schools and the other for most schools where the primary language of instruction is English. The public debate has focused almost exclusively on the curriculum for English language schools and this article is only concerned with that curriculum. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education made the development of the new history curriculum a priority – it was only delayed for twelve months on the eve of being finalised to reduce pressure on schools, particularly those in Auckland, who had experienced another lockdown in the second half of 2021. The final curriculum was released on 17 March 2022.

Methodology and Approach

This article reflects on our learning from multiple avenues of research and consultation engaged in since 2019. We began by conducting research with five secondary schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. This focused on examining student and teacher views and interest in history, along with expectations and concerns about the new curriculum. We also conducted a 38-item survey with 102 primary school teachers across 10 schools in the Manawatū-Whanganui region to gauge their experiences in history teaching at Years 1 to 6, and views about the incoming history curriculum. This engagement across secondary and primary schools gave us a sense of school perceptions of the Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories curriculum in general, prior to the release of the draft curriculum.

Our engagement as historians and history education specialists with the development of the curriculum, and in responding to the draft curriculum, has also informed this writing. Ardern's announcement made it clear that historians would be consulted in the development of the new curriculum, and one of the authors of this article was directly involved in that consultation. He was co-convenor of a panel of historians brought together by the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi as a consultative committee established to advise the Ministry of Education. The panel commented on an early version of the curriculum draft and provided an independent response to the draft curriculum published for consultation in February 2021. Alongside the Royal Society panel, several senior historians also made independent submissions. These were collated by the New Zealand Historical Association and have also informed this analysis.

The published and reported views from the Ministry of Education's consultation on the draft curriculum have also been incorporated into these reflections. The ministry called for submissions on the draft and established an online survey to collect and statistically analyse these responses. Separate written submissions could also be made during the consultation period that extended to 31 May 2021. There were 4,491 responses, and 488 individuals and organisations wrote submissions independently of the ministry survey.⁴ The report on the ministry's consultation by New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), published in early 2022, has been a valuable source of wider responses to the draft curriculum, given that the ministry did not provide a direct way of providing more discursive responses. We have not had access to the original data, or to the individual submissions.

Our reading of the ministry's consultation outcomes has been complemented by an investigation of media reporting, online blogs and discussions, and publicly shared submissions on the consultation. Content was gathered from online publications, including mainstream and social media, from the day of the Prime Minister's announcement in September 2019 until April 2022. Only articles containing interviews or direct quotations of teachers' or community members' opinions were selected.

Finally, we have sought the views of future teachers of the histories curriculum through a survey of 105 kaiako pitomata (student teachers) of Massey University's Graduate Diploma of Learning and Teaching programme, all of whom will implement the new curriculum from 2023. Thirty-eight student teachers were

surveyed in March 2021, just after the release of the first draft of the Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories curriculum, and a further 67 were surveyed in March 2022.⁵

This article has arisen, therefore, from the research we have conducted since the announcement of the Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories curriculum, and how we have interpreted the multiple discourses that have emerged from it. Essentially, we have looked to understand both what has been agreed as the importance of the new curriculum and what has been argued should be done about it – in effect, exploring concerns about how the past is, or should be, used.⁶

Drafting the Curriculum

That Aotearoa New Zealand had no national curriculum to teach its history may come as a surprise. This was not due to a neglect of the subject, but rather an effect of how social sciences and other disciplines have been delivered in this country's schools. Since the 1940s, history learning in primary schools has been positioned within the social studies curriculum, originally brought in after the 1944 Thomas Report.⁷ While social studies originally focused on history and geography learning, its disciplinary reach was widened in the 1960s so that history became just one of many subject areas in its curriculum. Specialists blamed the broad social studies focus for the demise of history learning in schools.⁸ The 1993 New Zealand Curriculum Framework, which provided a high degree of flexibility in the social sciences learning area, continued history's low profile.⁹ The 2007 New Zealand Curriculum, currently also under review, placed some historical topics into the social sciences learning area, but because schools have had wide discretion on what they teach, there has, in reality, only been patchy Aotearoa New Zealand history learning across the country's schools.¹⁰

The Ministry of Education was still holding to a flexible curriculum weeks before the curriculum announcement, telling a Parliamentary select committee that it did not favour increasing the level of prescription. However, the Prime Minister had other ideas. As she explained in her announcement, 'variation in delivery means too much is left to chance in the teaching and learning of this history'.¹¹ That prescription was indicated by the identification of seven topics likely to become compulsory:

- The arrival of Māori to Aotearoa New Zealand
- First encounters and early colonial history of Aotearoa New Zealand
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi and its history
- Colonisation of, and immigration to, Aotearoa New Zealand, including the New Zealand Wars
- Evolving national identity of Aotearoa New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- Aotearoa New Zealand's role in the Pacific
- Aotearoa New Zealand in the late twentieth century and the evolution of a national identity with cultural plurality.¹²

The early stages of the curriculum's development involved a broad range of actors. Whereas in the past historians and history teachers dominated curriculum development, this time only a handful of the members of a large steering group, Te Ohu Matua, were historians. A much smaller writing group had two historians, both Māori historians, whose responsibility was to ensure the centrality and quality of Māori history in the curriculum. There were two education academics specialising in the teaching of history and several highly experienced history and social studies teachers. Academic historians contributed through an independent panel, put together by the Royal Society, who reviewed and commented on the draft; once before it was finalised, and then on the draft released for public consultation. The ministry established other consultative

groups, but Te Ohu Matua, which was meant to oversee the process, was considerably marginalised by the inability to meet during much of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The draft curriculum, released for consultation from 3 February 2021 to 31 May 2021, had three elements: Understand, Know and Do. The Understand element identified three ‘big ideas’:

1. Māori history is the foundational and continuous history of Aotearoa New Zealand
2. Colonisation and its consequences have been central to our history for the past 200 years and continue to influence all aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand society
3. The course of Aotearoa New Zealand’s history has been shaped by the exercise and effects of power.¹³

The Know element also had three parts: Whakapapa me te whanaungatanga, which focused on ‘how the past shapes who we are today’; Tūrangawaewae me te kaiakiatanga, dealing with contested relationships with natural resources; and Tino rangatiratanga me te kāwanatanga, which examined ‘contests over authority and control’ and specifically mentioned the guarantees of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Finally, the Do element focused on historical methods and approaches: ‘Identifying and using sequence’; ‘Identifying and critiquing sources and perspectives’; and ‘Interpreting past decisions and actions’.¹⁴ Although this was a national curriculum, it was to be interpreted locally, allowing schools to retain significant discretion in how they related the curriculum to their own communities.

Māori history was to the fore. The limited range of topics presented within the Know elements emphasised studies of the comprehensive impact of colonisation.¹⁵ In the Do element, there was an emphasis on ‘paying deliberate attention to mātauranga Māori sources and approaches’, showing an underlying assumption that there were missing Māori voices, which would provide a way of critiquing existing narratives. In the final Do element, students were to be empowered to ‘make ethical judgements concerning right and wrong’, although this was heavily qualified by acknowledging hindsight, recognising that present values differ considerably from those of the time, and admitting the need to factor in the situations facing people in the past. Arguably, these characteristics made it an unashamedly postcolonial history.

The Public Responses

There was a generally positive public response to the curriculum’s announcement and development. In the early period after the announcement, media reporting highlighted support for the curriculum and confirmed a pre-existing view that Aotearoa New Zealand must confront its colonial past and the place of Māori in society. News articles focused on the background lobbying that had led to the decision, described how different actors across schools, academia, the heritage sector, and Māori communities welcomed the curriculum, and speculated on how the curriculum might be rolled out, rather than questioning the decision itself.¹⁶

The NZCER analysis of the ministry’s consultation on the draft curriculum showed high levels of support overall, but it was evident that teachers and kaiako comprised the greater proportion of those expressing positive support. The public responses also reflected how perceptions of the curriculum were shaped by identity and citizenship perspectives. Respondents expressed excitement at the new curriculum, noted that it had been a ‘long road to get to this point’, and asserted that it was ‘a hugely important step towards building a better, more equitable and fairer New Zealand into the future’.¹⁷

From the consultation’s public responses, it was evident that higher proportions of positive responses came from Māori and Pacific peoples. Those that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I think the content reflects the stories our young people need to know’ were 44 per cent from all respondents, compared

with 60 per cent of Māori, 56 per cent of Pacific peoples and 55 per cent of Asian peoples. Likewise, Māori, Pacific and Asian respondents also responded more positively that they believed the content ‘reflects our bicultural history as a nation’ and ‘will encourage more diverse local stories to be acknowledged and learnt’.¹⁸ Māori and Pacific respondents expressed the hope that the history curriculum would evoke ‘a deeper cultural understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand’ and ‘a greater sense of identity and belonging’.¹⁹ Some Māori were more specific in expressing their expectation that it would provide their tamariki (children) with pride in their identity, and ‘remove negative stigmas attached with Māori stories and ways of looking at things... it will open up acceptance and subsequent proliferation of Māori stories and art forms/creativity’.²⁰

However, Māori and Pacific peoples also expressed the greatest concerns about teachers and kaiako with a lack of historical knowledge and/or biases. Moriori on Rēkohu (Chatham Islands) expressed concerns about exclusion, concerned that their history may be ignored given that the draft curriculum mentioned them only once. Moriori representatives argued that there was a need for a ‘lot of unravelling’ to tell the real Moriori history, as the indigenous people of Rēkohu.²¹ Māori respondents, noted in the NZCER report, expressed fears that teachers would not know enough to teach the history, or that they may distort historical explanations or, indeed, bring a racist view to that teaching.²²

For indigenous and minority peoples, therefore, the draft appeared to represent hope for the future development of Aotearoa New Zealand society, even if there were concerns about how it might be taught. However, a common criticism was that ‘other’ histories should be incorporated more explicitly, especially of Pacific, Chinese, Indian and other Asian peoples. The desire for children to see themselves in Aotearoa New Zealand history was an important aspect of those responses. For example, a Pacific community member expressed that ‘Kids need to see themselves and how local historical events relate to them and their lives, shaping who they are and how they may become.’²³

Chinese communities were particularly vocal in calling for their histories to be more explicitly included.²⁴ Chinese author Helene Wong wrote in a *Stuff* article that ‘180 years of Chinese NZ history appear to count for nothing’, asking where acknowledgement of Chinese and other migrant groups, such as Dalmatians, Greeks, Italians, Muslims, Jews, and other ‘Asians’, was in the curriculum draft.²⁵ Chinese historian Manying Ip also voiced her concern that the curriculum fell well short of the opportunity it presented, and risked ‘continuing this unfortunate legacy of treating Chinese New Zealanders as perpetual migrants, a label not applied to the British people who have settled in Aotearoa’.²⁶ Similar feeling was obvious in Asian peoples’ responses in the NZCER report. Ip argued that the history curriculum needed to be ‘everybody’s story’ and better recognise the diversity of the country’s population, past and present.²⁷ Asia New Zealand Foundation head Simon Draper also argued on behalf of Asian communities that ‘New Zealand has been connected to the Asian ports and trade routes since European contact – and contact with Asian peoples likewise dates back to this period’.²⁸ He highlighted that Indian and Chinese stories especially were important in Aotearoa New Zealand’s nineteenth century history.

Despite the high support levels evident across different communities, some detractors took exception to the postcolonial nature of the curriculum. However, this criticism did not gain a high profile in mainstream media, or in the NZCER report. The report acknowledged that some respondents had rejected the importance of Māori history, or its validity, and had argued for a more ‘one nation’ focused approach.²⁹ Such views tended to be diverted into other debates over the name Aotearoa, or other cultural issues. The detractors’ voices were most strongly presented in blog posts by the right-wing Hobson’s Pledge and Democracy Action groups, where the history curriculum was presented as part of a wider decline of education in New Zealand, and incorporated into what they saw as the ‘smug attitude of general compliance with the left-wing Treaty based cultural identity ideology’.³⁰ Both Hobson’s Pledge and Democracy Action provided template submissions to the ministry consultation, encouraging their members to argue that the curriculum was ‘seriously flawed, therefore must be rejected in its entirety’, especially because of ‘distortions’ in its nature and in the historical accounts it suggested.³¹

Political Parties

The reactions of political parties to the curriculum draft were relatively mild. Opposition parties supported the need for a national curriculum, even if they had concerns about the draft's detail and approach. The centre-right National Party, for example, engaged critically with the detail of the curriculum rather than its intent. The party's response came from education spokesperson Paul Goldsmith, who was a historian prior to entering Parliament in 2011. His submission did not challenge the focus on Māori history and the impact of colonisation, acknowledging they are 'massive themes in our history'. However, he expressed concerns about the curriculum turning children off history, having too narrow a focus, failing to acknowledge the successes in Aotearoa New Zealand's history and imposing political rather than historical objectives on the teaching of history.

But there are other massive themes, like the steady extension of the reach of governments into our lives, from our bank accounts to our bedrooms, for better or worse – or the emergence of a truly national identity independent from Britain – or the need for Kiwis to make a living far from markets, with entrepreneurship and innovation jostling with the ever-present fear of being shut out by protectionist big countries – or the desire to defend the freedoms we have inherited and painstakingly developed from the threats of fascism and communism – or the impact of waves of immigration from a variety of cultures into what has become a melting pot.³²

Goldsmith feared that a curriculum that was too political risked continual interference as 'successive governments will feel the need to change it, furthering a sense of politicised curriculum. That is in no one's interest.'³³ However, the whole tenor of his submission was more to argue for balance and a degree of political neutrality than anything else.

The right-wing ACT New Zealand Party, in Parliament with ten members due to receiving eight per cent of the vote in the 2020 election under the Mixed Member Proportional system, presented the most obvious attack on the curriculum. ACT has a libertarian economic message that has also become heavily complemented by conservative populism, including getting tough on criminals and attacking measures for Māori which it decries as 'separatism' and 'special privilege'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ACT had fewer qualms about attacking the curriculum on cultural grounds, although even here ACT did not launch a wholesale attack on the inclusion of colonisation or the importance of Māori history. On the three ideas that framed the curriculum, ACT's criticisms were more strident, but they still accepted that Māori history was important and even that colonisation was an important part of Aotearoa New Zealand's history.

The first 'big idea', that Māori history is the 'continuous history' of New Zealand, excludes the many peoples who have travelled from the furthest points of the globe, brought their histories and cultures with them and worked to give themselves, their families and this county and better future [sic].

The second, that colonisation 'continue[s] to influence all aspects of New Zealand society', is depressing and wrong and neglects the elements of our society that are untouched by colonisation.

The final big idea, that power has been the primary driver of our history, creates a narrative of oppressors and oppressed, and leaves out the many forces that have propelled our past, including scientific discoveries, technological innovations, business, and artistic creativity.³⁴

When the final curriculum was released in 2022, ACT did no more than recycle its submission made twelve months earlier as its press release, ignoring the changes which had taken place, despite those changes addressing many of their concerns. The Māori Party, which in 2020 was returned to Parliament with two

seats by winning one of the seven seats allocated to Māori who are on the Māori electoral roll, described the curriculum as long overdue. The Green Party, sitting to the left with ten seats and in government with Labour, placed the curriculum firmly in a postcolonial setting, applauding Ardern's decision as a way of giving justice to those affected by colonial oppression.³⁵

Despite the political posturing of different parties to their constituencies, their responses to the curriculum showed a surprising degree of consensus about potentially more contentious issues. All the political parties acknowledged the emphasis on Māori history and the recognition of the impact of colonisation on Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand society. Both National and ACT suggested that the curriculum could be more balanced by acknowledging the experience of diverse groups in Aotearoa New Zealand and better recognising this country's economic and business history. Unsurprisingly, they thought that the absence of economic and business history was significant, and that there was a degree of 'political correctness' in the curriculum that went beyond what they would consider appropriate; but these were niggles at the edge of political debate, especially when compared to such debates in other countries. This political consensus has been built over the last thirty years, as both major political parties have attempted to resolve differences between iwi and the Crown over Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past, and has become deeply ingrained in this country's political culture.

Historians' Responses

A similar political consensus has been reflected in academic circles. While there was some debate at the beginning of the century about the Waitangi Tribunal's uses of history, this remained academic. At that time, Don Brash, leader of the National Party opposition, attempted to call a halt to any special recognition of Māori needs and public policy. But even here, Brash still supported the Waitangi Tribunal's investigation into historical claims and subsequent treaty settlements. Opposition to the work of the Waitangi Tribunal, or to postcolonial history as a result, remained on the marginal extremes of political opinion.

Michael Bassett, a one-time member of the Waitangi Tribunal, was the only historian who applied the cultural language and approach of the history wars to attack the curriculum. Bassett's "bleeding" versions of our history' came closest to invoking the attack on Australia's 'Black arm brigade'.³⁶ Stuart Smith, National MP for Kaikoura, drew on Bassett's views to argue that 'there is a narrative running through modern New Zealand that says, prior to colonisation Aotearoa was a land of paradise and freedom and when the British arrived it turned to anarchy and chaos'.³⁷ One of Bassett's commentaries was withdrawn by the *Northland Age*, and he was vociferously attacked by commentators and not supported by other historians.³⁸ His views nonetheless became fodder for the cultural warriors of the right on social media.³⁹ One of Bassett's major arguments focused on the curriculum's apparent absence of coverage of the musket wars, where during the 1820s and 1830s intertribal warfare accounted for the deaths of up to 20,000 people. Ironically, the Royal Society panel was concerned that the penultimate draft, which it commented on in late 2020, had too much content on the musket wars, to the extent of overwhelming the curriculum's treatment of the New Zealand Wars after 1840.

Bassett was the only historian who attempted to mobilise political opinion against the curriculum, but this did not mean an absence of major concerns among other historians. While the general debate was only loosely connected to the detail of the draft, historians were very concerned with what was in the curriculum, what was missing, and the underlying approach to teaching the past and its understanding of historical method. This more detailed scrutiny led to some anxiety, as expressed in the Royal Society's independent advice and in the commentary by some of the country's most experienced and respected historians. However, none of this concern challenged the central place of Māori histories in the curriculum or the inclusion of a broad coverage of colonisation. Nor did it undermine historians' delight and enthusiasm

for the government's intention to finally do something about the absence of a systematic programme of teaching Aotearoa New Zealand history in schools:

The Panel strongly commends key features of the curriculum: to place Māori history central to New Zealand's historical experience, both as histories of hapū and iwi on their own terms, and as hapū and iwi histories influenced by the impact of colonisation and responses to it. The emphasis on multiple narratives is timely.⁴⁰

The panel was also enthusiastic about the determination to view this national curriculum through local lenses. Nonetheless, the panel was concerned about the 'brevity, fragmentation, and, therefore, coherence of the curriculum draft'.⁴¹

Mirroring the public response, the panel had concerns about the degree to which the diversity of migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand was acknowledged, explaining that the draft curriculum:

does not specifically recognise the diversity of New Zealand society and the very different experiences based on ethnicity, gender, religion, or social status. Aotearoa New Zealand's society has also come to include migrants and ancestries from English, Irish, and Scots origins; those from Dalmatia, Bohemia, Scandinavia, and Croatia; Jews and other Europeans; the different waves of Chinese and Indian migrants; and the specific experiences of Samoans, Tongans, Niueans, Tokelauans, and other Pacific Peoples.⁴²

Paul Moon drew attention to the thinness of pre-contact history.⁴³ Manying Ip's concern about the absence of Chinese history has already been highlighted. But it was not just the absence of explicit references to different groups that was a concern, the panel also felt that the relationship between these groups after arrival – 'the whakapapa relationships that are formed here, the transformation that takes place through interactions within social groups, and with Aotearoa New Zealand's environment, economy, and political systems' – also needed more attention.⁴⁴ It also felt that community agency was ignored. History had become too much what was done to people, rather than what they did themselves.

As far as the topics were concerned, historians argued there was just too much missing, too much focus on the nineteenth century, and little explicit mention of women, welfare, pre-contact history, labour and economic history, environmental history, inequality and poverty, disease and demographic history, political conflict, popular culture, and Aotearoa New Zealand's role in international affairs. Perhaps the most important absence was Aotearoa New Zealand's connection to the world, recognising that this country's history was largely shaped by events taking place beyond our shores. Of many of the other topics that were explored in depth by the panel, the limited approach to Pacific history and the impact of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand was particularly important.

The panel certainly appreciated the extent to which students were to be introduced to the methodology of history and not just provided with a series of narratives, but they had reservations about how the Do element described this methodology. Too much of the curriculum, they felt, was aimed at demonstrating fixed conclusions, rather than being based on open enquiry. They were also concerned that while the Do element recognised different interpretations of history, there was a need to develop students' skills to discriminate between these narratives.

In an age of fake news and fake history, students should be able to not only know that histories can come from contested frames of reference, but be able to test alternative narratives on the basis of the evidence they use and the conclusions they draw from them. It is vital that students are introduced to the richness and strangeness of the past and that they have the chance to explore it, learn how to use different types of evidence, and how to build arguments and express those in writing or verbally.⁴⁵

The historians also looked uneasily at the curriculum's intent to make ethical judgements about the past, to determine what was right and wrong.

Historians who made independent submissions, such as Anne Salmond, Jock Phillips and Erik Olssen, shared many of these concerns, some of which were also published. Above all, historians worried that a curriculum that was so rooted in problematic pasts and that clearly expressed conclusions about the past could be counterproductive.⁴⁶ Historians feared that a curriculum that was so earnest would not only fail to capture the enthusiasm and passion of children, but also turn them off history entirely. They felt that it was possible to deal with difficult histories, but at the same time develop a curriculum that was exciting, engaging and even fun.

Teacher Responses

Teachers' highly positive responses to the draft curriculum reflected findings from our research prior to the draft's release. Some teachers expressed similar concerns to those voiced by the public and politicians, yet, overall, they were more focused on the challenges they foresaw in implementing the curriculum rather than on its content.

That teachers were positive about the idea of the curriculum may be partly explained by the leadership shown by the New Zealand History Teachers' Association, which had lobbied prior to Ardern's announcement for learning about the New Zealand Wars in the history curriculum. Media reports following the announcement included positive quotes from teachers who emphasised the importance of learning the country's history, and their view that the teaching of colonisation and its effects starting at primary school would enable students to 'reflect on who we are and how we've evolved over time, you know, the bicultural history of our country'.⁴⁷ Teachers who felt that they were not 'taught anything at all in primary or intermediate', and that secondary history learning had only been 'from a colonial viewpoint', looked forward to delivering a more comprehensive Aotearoa New Zealand history education.⁴⁸ The place of local history also pleased teachers, who looked forward to the possibility of new connections with local hapū.⁴⁹ By studying 'lessons from our own history', such as 'Kupe and the double-hull waka arriving in Aotearoa', they expressed hope that students might increasingly appreciate New Zealanders' achievements; not going to 'Marvel comics for a superhero because we've got our own superheroes'.⁵⁰

From the start, teachers exhibited commitment to ensuring that the curriculum was interesting, meaningful, and appropriate to students' levels of learning. However, they also expressed fears that curriculum writers and experts might lack understanding of primary school needs and priorities. Several respondents emphasised their wish to have access to 'age-appropriate' learning resources, which needed to be 'written in child speak' and attentive to 'developmental appropriateness of topics', as well as 'practical, simple and digestible' to students. Unlike the historians, details about content did not worry teachers so much as the format in which this content would reach schools.⁵¹

Many teachers and students in our research talked about 'Treaty of Waitangi fatigue', complaining that learning about the treaty had been 'introduced' year after year, but in ways that not only turned students off the treaty and Māori history, but also Aotearoa New Zealand history generally. Both students and teachers feared that making Aotearoa New Zealand history compulsory would isolate Aotearoa New Zealand from wider histories and make it difficult to see the links between these.⁵²

Teachers were also concerned to build their own knowledge and capabilities in teaching Aotearoa New Zealand history. Except for the Treaty of Waitangi, the majority of primary teachers we surveyed did not feel competent to teach the historical topics originally suggested for inclusion by the Prime Minister.⁵³ However, while some identified a need to build their knowledge of the histories, most equally believed they had sufficient pedagogical training to teach any historical topic, including 'difficult' ones, provided they received a 'consistent plan', a 'very "prescribed" structured curriculum', 'clear guidance' and 'step by

step in detailed guides'. What they would need, they said, was to have adequate guidance, support and professional learning and development that would provide 'support from consultants/facilitators to grow both teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills for teaching history', as well as access to experts who were 'available for direct consultation'.⁵⁴ Such concerns were also expressed through news reporting, and were linked to concerns about upcoming curricular changes in other areas.⁵⁵ Some scepticism was expressed by veteran teachers, based on their previous experiences, as to the ministry's willingness or ability to provide appropriate support for teachers.⁵⁶

Despite such worries, teachers have been proactive in their public responses to the new curriculum, such as in calling for more partnership between educators and *mana whenua* to enable responsive approaches to Māori histories.⁵⁷ Teachers have taken initiative in using the new curriculum's place-based and bicultural focus to strengthen connections between schools and 'the local hapū', and to ensure that local *tangata whenua* are at the centre of 'discussions on how history is taught'.⁵⁸ Teachers have also used the context of the launching of the new curriculum to draw attention to colonisation, and the need to tackle controversial themes from the early years of schooling.⁵⁹ Schools also took the nationwide discussion about history as an opportunity to remind the public that they were teaching Aotearoa New Zealand history – especially local histories – long before the release of the new curriculum.⁶⁰

The positive responses of experienced teachers were amplified in our survey of Massey University's *kaiako pitomata* (student teachers), suggesting the next generation of teachers see genuine opportunities in the new curriculum. Most expressed passionate support of the new curriculum they will begin to implement from 2023. To many, this was an overdue document that 'should have been done a long time ago'. Others felt that the new curriculum's content was not only relevant, but also 'has been missing in mainstream education for a long time' and that they looked forward 'to be a part of bringing this new curriculum into the classroom'. While they expressed similar concerns to experienced teachers about having adequate resourcing, incorporating multiple perspectives, delivering the curriculum in age-appropriate ways, and ensuring their own knowledge was adequate, their enthusiasm for the curriculum and its novelty was very evident. One comment that 'it is so different from the history that I learned in schools, and I absolutely love it' captured much of the student respondents' enchantment with the new curriculum.⁶¹

The Different Responses to the Curriculum

For a history war to emerge, major political parties must see political capital in stoking conflict, whether through commitment to an ideal or for political expediency. In Australia, the 'history wars' were co-opted in the battle between Labour's Paul Keating and the Coalition's John Howard, while in the United States, approaches to history clearly divide Republicans and Democrats. Academic divisions between historians also have the potential to contribute to broader social conflicts, feeding into political ruptures. Conflict in Australia was initiated by new historical scholarship on Australia's treatment of indigenous people and an attack on this work by more conservative nationalist historians.⁶² However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, rather than a history war, an earnest consensus has been apparent, despite the wide-ranging interpretations and views expressed.

Across the wide range of responses to the Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories curriculum, perceptions of history have been expressed from multiple angles: history as informing identity and citizenship that invokes politicised responses; history as an academic subject representing specific intellectual skills; and history as something to be framed and resourced for teaching. The public and political responses most obviously presented expressions of aspirations for Aotearoa New Zealand society, culture and identity. Belonging, or a longing for belonging and inclusion, were apparent in many of the responses. The strength of calls for inclusion in the curriculum is possibly the main reason that no history war emerged.

Expressions of what, how and why history should be learned differed most markedly between historians and teachers. Those differences can to some extent be explained by the distinctive ways history has been understood and taught in universities compared with schools. In universities, history is taught primarily in the humanities, whereas in schools, history is part of the social science curriculum, where it is strongly focused on the skills of citizenship and emphasises the contribution of the social sciences to understanding the present.⁶³ These presentist objectives sit uneasily with historians' understanding of the primacy of finding out what happened and why, before assigning responsibility. This does not mean that historians ignore ethical questions, but these are not the primary or ultimate objective of historical research; even research that is undertaken for the Waitangi Tribunal does not make judgements on the Crown's actions in the past.

Over recent decades, the teaching of school history has developed its own intellectual and methodological principles, emphasising the development of 'historical thinking' skills.⁶⁴ The curriculum writers, academics and teachers were well-grounded in this literature, as well as being experienced in applying this thinking to the specific needs of a settler society, and to the needs of Māori and Pacific students. Many of the developments in school history have taken place beyond the consciousness of academic historians, where the focus is still more research driven. While historians, and many of the general public, saw the curriculum as an incomplete lattice, teachers were much more able to look at the curriculum and see how it could be expanded to cover the very topics historians found absent. This reflects the way teachers have engaged with the liberal Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum over recent decades.

The Final Curriculum

The final curriculum was much larger than the draft. The ministry had listened and broadened the scope to respond to many of the concerns that were raised. Some of the additions addressed the absence of women, non-British migrants, economics and Aotearoa New Zealand's place within broader international history. The most substantial change to the final iteration of the curriculum was the inclusion of the fourth big idea, Relationships, which clearly connects Aotearoa New Zealand history to the wider world. In this case, the big idea was a high-level aspect of the curriculum and embedding it more obviously was clearly a response to criticism.

However, this expanded curriculum did not require substantial rewriting. The 2021 draft released by the ministry was intended to be a simple, straightforward curriculum, not too complicated, not too detailed, and hopefully easily navigated by teachers. To do this, whole sections of the earlier draft were left out of the material that was released for public consultation. It is not clear how much of this was a deliberate attempt to limit content creep within the curriculum, or simply a response to pretesting with teachers, who were reportedly overwhelmed by the size of the curriculum. In responding to criticism, the ministry was able to re-include material that was already there anyway. Nonetheless, the expanded scope enabled more detail – and therefore more perspectives – to be shown.

Conclusion

To date, the development of the new Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories curriculum, characterised by a strong postcolonial focus, has not sparked any history war. Neither the historians nor the political parties, with very few exceptions, were prepared to turn the technical aspects of creating a new curriculum into an out-and-out cultural battle. In explaining this, we emphasised some degree of Aotearoa New Zealand exceptionalism – the extent that Māori inclusion in society, MMP and the work of the Waitangi Tribunal has become deeply ingrained in Aotearoa New Zealand's political society. However, this study is retrospective, and should not necessarily be seen as predictive of the future. There may also have been quite short term and specific influences on our conclusions. The ministry managed the process well by containing debate to the content of the curriculum and making it difficult for that debate to flow over into

other cultural issues. This was easier in the first part of 2021 than may be the case in the future. The Prime Minister's popularity was riding high, and the development of the curriculum did not attach itself to other cultural conflicts. This may no longer be quite so easy if such a postcolonial curriculum becomes linked by its critics to other government initiatives that seek to dismantle colonial structures and provide for greater Māori governance, autonomy and rights. Only the future will show whether the relatively relaxed way in which the country responded to the curriculum was a sign of its resilience on such issues, or an anomaly.

Endnotes

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- cent of Māori, 61 per cent of Pacific and 60 per cent of Asian respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the curriculum would allow more diverse local stories to be told, compared with 51 per cent of all respondents. NZCER, op cit., pp10, 83.
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