

How can Teachers put Competency-Based Curricula into Practice?

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Abstract

The current New Zealand Curriculum suggests a new way of thinking about student development in schools. A shift to a more future-focussed curriculum has brought a greater emphasis on supporting students to develop the key competencies outlined in the 2007 document. Consequently, teachers must learn to balance the new competency-based curriculum, with existing demands to develop student academic success. This can be challenging when ways of integrating the key competencies into teaching practices vary depending of the learning context. The reviewed literature suggests principles embraced by early-adopters of the New Zealand Curriculum can be used to direct teachers in leading their teaching focus to assist in developing students' key competencies.

Keywords: *Key Competencies, Implementation, Development, Principles, Personalising Learning, Inquiry Learning, Knowledge.*



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Introduction

The New Zealand Curriculum intends to ensure all students' future participation in both the community and the economy (Ministry of Education, 2007). It is hoped that the five key competencies (Thinking; Using language, symbols, and texts; Managing self; Relating to others; Participating and contributing) will play an essential role in achieving this goal. Understanding ways that they will do so, however, can be challenging for teachers who must meet the demands of teaching specific subject content when a strong focus remains on summative assessment. This review examines an assortment of contemporary literature to establish how teachers can incorporate the key competencies into their classrooms to benefit the learning of all students and develop "confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7).

Because it remains a challenge for some schools to weave the key competencies into their teaching philosophies and practice, up-to-date findings on successful approaches are difficult to come by. Yet much can be said for earlier studies on the early-adopters of the new curriculum that recognise significant shifts in schools' perceptions of learning. These shifts have led them to value the key competencies and successfully implement them in their teaching to better develop students' learning and skills. Many of the findings hint at re-defining teacher and student roles as strategies for implementing the key competencies into practice. Attempts to make the key competencies explicit to students, personalise their learning, and to re-define what knowledge is

taught, have brought a change in the way teachers and students work together to develop lifelong skills.

Implementation: Strategies or Principles?

The key competencies have been widely valued by many for their ability to prepare students in becoming lifelong learners who will thrive in our ever-changing world. Yet while many school leaders and teachers recognise their benefits in preparing students, implementing them can be challenging when there is little clarification on exactly how this can, or should, be done. The key competencies were adapted from those expressed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and in the process were given plain-language titles that minimise the use of jargon (Hipkins & Boyd, 2011). Still it seems there is little, or no, guidance provided within the New Zealand Curriculum on how to integrate the key competencies with the learning area content that composes the back section, which is the more traditional half of the document (Hipkins & Boyd, 2011). Cowie et al., (2009) provide a possible explanation for this, believing the curriculum implementation is "evolutionary and adaptive, contingent on the people involved, their history together and the cultural, material and structural context" (p. 2). This suggests that perhaps the implementation of key competencies relies on broader principles, rather than specific strategies that may work for some, but not all, learning contexts. As Brough (2008) explained, Dewey's theories on curriculum integration may assist in developing a direction for key competency



implementation. He stated how Dewey viewed schools as "...miniature democratic communities, where learners work collaboratively in order to solve real-life problems. Through active participation he believed students would develop the skills required to become well-functioning members of society" (p. 16). These views on student-centred pedagogy align with the New Zealand Curriculum's vision and highlight the importance of positioning students at the centre of teaching and learning.

Making Key Competencies Explicit

Crucial to implementing the key competencies in teaching pedagogy is a strong understanding of learning intentions by students. For students to successfully understand not only what they are learning but why, it is essential that the key competencies are made explicit. As Brough (2008) asserts, the Ministry of Education (2007) advocates that effective teaching occurs when students understand what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how they can use their own learning. A study conducted by Boyd and Watson (2006), found that teachers viewed the key competencies as something they would embed within the curriculum and be explicit about introducing to students. It seemed that the teachers interviewed from six different schools across New Zealand considered that their focus on the key competencies had given them and their students a shared language to talk about motivation, social skills and behaviour and why these were important (Boyd & Watson, 2006). Being explicit about the key competencies had also enabled them to be developed and enacted, as teachers saw a shift in focus from behaviour management towards assisting students to self-manage and understand the importance of the key competencies (Boyd & Watson, 2006). Furthermore, the results showed that students considered their learning to be more successful when their schoolwork was in-depth and cited the exploration of the key competencies. In addition, they found the use of learning intentions, goal setting, and success criteria helped to focus their learning (Boyd & Watson, 2006). This highlights a need for teachers to make the key competencies more explicit to students to support and encourage competency-based curricula within their practice. Twist and McDowall (2010) support this notion when they discuss life-long literacy and the integration of the key competencies and reading. They believe that when the key competencies are integrated into reading programmes, interpretive space is opened up. This means students have more opportunity to make meaning according to the world they bring to the act of reading, rather than merely making meaning according to the world revealed by the text (Twist & McDowall, 2010).

Making the key competencies explicit to students requires teachers to model and help to facilitate the learning of them (Hipkins, 2006, cited in Brudevold-Iverson, 2012). Teachers can have a significant influence on students' socioemotional skill development, either through explicitly teaching the key competencies or by modelling the key competencies and integrating them into teaching practices (Hattie, 2008, cited in Brudevold-Iverson, 2012). Brudevold-Iverson, (2012) found that the influence of both school and community characteristics on the school culture could impact student's learning and engagement of the key competencies in many ways. Links between the school and community could further assist in providing students with

authentic learning opportunities as they see direct links between the key competencies and their outside worlds (Brudevold-Iverson, 2012). Moreover, when teachers consider how the key competencies might transform existing practices, connections appear between the *Effective Pedagogy* section of the New Zealand Curriculum and *Learning to Learn*, one of the New Zealand Curriculum's principles (Hipkins & Boyd, 2011). This highlights a way for teachers to make the key competencies explicit to themselves through areas of the curriculum that are familiar, as well as to their students.

Personalising learning

In alignment with the New Zealand Curriculum's student-centred vision, a common theme throughout the examined studies in implementing the key competencies was the idea of personalising learning. As Bolstad (2011) outlines in her report of the synthesised findings from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) studies of future-oriented education, personalising learning means that learners have time, support, and opportunities to have an input into how their learning is shaped. This means that they tend to be better at describing what they have come to learn about their strengths, weaknesses, interests and motivations as learners and therefore, they can understand how these relate to other contexts of their lives and their ideas about how they see themselves in the future (Bolstad, 2011). Bolstad (2011) ascertains that personalising learning means that students are supported in learning through "authentic, relevant, real-world contexts, where students' interests, aptitudes and the issues and opportunities within their own communities can form the basis for learning" (p. 84). A key message established from Bolstad's (2011) findings is the importance of not simply finding better ways to raise everyone's achievement to an identical level or standard, but to support every person to develop their full potential. Moreover, Hipkins, Roberts, and Bolstad, (2007) assert that students must be encouraged to play an active part in making decisions in learning activities and become actively aware of themselves as learners (an important aspect of the key competency "managing self"). They assert: "More active student involvement in learning is central to the idea of becoming a capable learner, which is the main thrust of the key competencies" (sec. 1, p. 5). This suggests that it is essential for teachers to consider their learners as active participants in their own learning and development of the key competencies.

While clear arguments for the advantages of personalising learning to incorporate the development of the key competencies into teaching practices have been established, Boyd & Watson (2006) outline that inquiry learning is key in supporting students to develop the key competencies. Likewise, Cowie et al., (2009) assert that some schools have encouraged students' development on the key competencies through greater use of inquiry learning and independent research. Furthermore, Beane (as cited in Brough, 2005) believes that critical inquiry into socially significant issues helps young learners to develop an understanding of themselves and the world, and at times, allows opportunity for social action. It is believed that inquiry-based learning enables students to make use of their personal knowledge and therefore, heightens their ability to develop their skills in participating and contributing and other key competencies (Twist & McDowall, 2010). Specifically, Twist and McDowall (2010) identified that the teachers in their study

were unaware of the power of drawing students' personal knowledge into reading conversations, and saw key competencies develop as students and teachers learnt how to make use of who they were and what they knew as they made meaning of text. Moreover, [Hong's \(2012\)](#) research on the practices outlined in schools in South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand suggest more diversified and student-centred instructional methods including self-directed inquiry, project-based learning, group discussions, and presentations should be used to develop a more competency-based curriculum.

A Shift in Knowledge Focus

Since studies indicate that personalising learning acts as a broad principle for weaving the key competencies into classroom learning, questions are raised about the types of knowledge that should be taught to help shift the focus to future-focussed learning. It seems that early adopters of the ideas about the key competencies discovered that exploring the key competencies were moving schools away from content-focussed learning (Bolstad, 2011). An increasing emphasis was being placed on students developing a wider range of skills and competencies and learning dispositions, and schools valued pedagogies of co-construction with students (Bolstad, 2011). Highlighting this notion of co-construction, in [Hong's \(2012\)](#) study of the changing nature and role of school curricula, she acknowledges schools that since taking the competency-approach to teaching, have begun to shift their attention to how students respond to their teaching rather than covering content knowledge in textbooks. In the context of New Zealand, teachers in Hong's (2012) study believed that they needed to revise their curriculum from a content-driven to a more process-driven one to develop students' key competencies. [Hong's \(2012\)](#) idea suggests a need for teachers to focus on teaching their learners the importance of valuing their learning process and reflecting on it so they can develop their skills in learning to learn and develop the key competencies.

Some social realist writers have highlighted a world-wide trend for new curricula models to downgrade knowledge ([Priestley & Sinnema, 2014](#)). Yet as the key competencies are often seen as developing a new type of knowledge in themselves, perhaps [Priestley and Sinnema's \(2014\)](#) argument that critics are pointing at an overall shift from specification of disciplinary knowledge to an emphasis on the development of generic skills, highlights a shift in knowledge focus, rather than a development of knowledge hierarchy. As Hipkins et al., (2007) affirm, content-coverage is no longer the single most important factor in developing successful learners (Hipkins et al., 2007). It seems that the key competencies and content knowledge are, in fact, more complementary than oppositional, as without something to teach, teachers cannot develop students' key competencies ([Hong, 2012](#)). [Hong \(2012\)](#) discovered that the schools in her research never totally disregarded or downgraded content knowledge in traditional subject areas, rather they used content knowledge as a tool for students to develop and use various aspects of the key competencies. Thus, [Hong \(2012\)](#) believes: "what competency-based curriculum requires is reforming the way content knowledge is organised and brought to students, not denying its value" (p. 35).

Still, while content-coverage may need to be reduced, this does not mean that curriculum content no longer matters, it means

that knowledge will not necessarily always be acquired in a nationally co-ordinated manner simply for its own sake (Hipkins et al., 2007). Instead, students will be taught new knowledge in the form of the key competencies and develop skills to use their competencies in new contexts (Hipkins et al., 2007). Yet to not under-estimate the importance of subject-based knowledge, Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown & McGee (2011), highlight that teachers need a strong knowledge of the nature of their subject as a knowledge-building discipline, particularly if they are going to shift their pedagogical focus from ready-made products of learning to more participatory acts of making meaning. In connecting the school curriculum to develop students' key competencies, [Hong \(2012\)](#) establishes that it requires a transformative, not additive approach. The key competencies are not seen as a new teaching component, but as an addition onto an existing curriculum ([Hong, 2012](#)). This highlights the idea that the key competencies can be considered as new knowledge, and should be balanced out with more traditional content knowledge. As teachers in Cowie et al.'s (2009) study have acknowledged, students need to achieve both more traditional knowledge outcomes and other types of outcomes related to being an ongoing learner and knowing how to use knowledge, not just get it.

In addition, a shift in knowledge focus has seen changes in assessment, with some schools adopting a more explicit focus on the teacher sharing learning intentions and encouraging personal goal setting to prioritise assessment-for-learning and incorporate the key competencies (Cowie et al., 2009). Yet, while teachers should aim to implement more activities and ideas related to assessment-for-learning to assist learners in developing the key competencies, making pedagogical changes should not alter the intended content or conceptual learning focus (Hipkins & Boyd, 2011). Hipkins and Boyd (2011) argue that when teachers use assessment-for-learning strategies, students may become more involved in monitoring their own progress, yet the targets of that progress may remain as they were. They explain that changes in teaching pedagogy, such as focus on assessment-for-learning, position key competencies as agents of curriculum improvement, but not necessarily as potentially transforming the curriculum that students experience (Hipkins & Boyd, 2011).

Conclusion

The New Zealand Curriculum intends to guide schools in developing students who are well-prepared for the future through competency-based curricula. In doing so, the New Zealand Curriculum has established the key competencies as being fundamental for students to actively participate in society today, and in the future. Teachers have a significant role to play in working to guide students in developing the key competencies. However, doing so can be challenging when a significant focus in schools still lies with high-stakes assessment and subject-based knowledge. Approaches for successfully incorporating the development of the key competencies are difficult to come by, yet as the research in this review has outlined, perhaps this is due to the nature of the key competencies. That is, that they will be approached and developed by teachers and students differently, depending on the learning context.

This suggests that teachers must find a balance between content-focussed learning, and competency development and

avoid regarding one as more important than the other. In supporting this, the reviewed literature suggests that teachers should make the key competencies explicit and place learners at the centre of learning through personalising learning and focus on student's process of knowledge and competency development. While the reviewed literature has outlined specific principles for developing students' key competencies from early-adopter schools, further research on more recent findings of the successfulness of these principles would greater develop teachers' ability to balance both academic, content-focussed pedagogy with competency-based curricula.

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