



Student-centred curriculum integration in primary schools: nurturing democratic citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This article investigates how James A. Beane's model of student-centred curriculum integration (CI) enhances students' learning experiences in the classroom by meeting diverse learning needs and fostering democratic citizenship. It discusses the theory of Beane's model of CI with respect to John Dewey's underpinning philosophy of democratic education and explores the practice of Beane's model via the narratives of two of the authors who implemented the model in primary schools in Aotearoa/ New Zealand (NZ). The findings show that implementing student-centred CI in contexts that are meaningful and relevant to students has the capacity to enhance the value and impact of students' learning experiences. In the process, the democratic design of Beane's model allows issues of social justice, inclusion and multiculturalism to be tackled by giving students agency and enabling them to 'make a difference' within their communities.

Keywords Democratic curriculum · Curriculum integration · Personal integration · Social integration · Integration of knowledge · Student-centred curriculum design

Introduction

The century-old concept of curriculum integration (CI) occupies a backwater in the literature but in Aotearoa/ New Zealand (NZ) it keeps resurfacing. Over many decades, innovative teachers in NZ have implemented various forms of CI in their classrooms (e.g., Arrow-smith & Wood, 2015; Dowden, 2011; McKinnon et al., 1991; McPhail, 2017; Richardson, 1964, 2012; Somerset, 1938; Strachan, 1938). In recent years, teachers in NZ have been inspired by James A. Beane's (1993, 1997, 2005) democratic model of CI, which he developed in the tradition of the American Progressive movement to cater

for the developmental and learning needs of young adolescent students in the USA (e.g., Brough, 2012, 2013; Fogarty-Perry, 2017; Fraser et al., 2013; Fraser & Deane, 2010; McDowall & Hipkins, 2019).

This article extends earlier work (Dowden & Fogarty-Perry, 2017), which reported on the implementation of a democratic model of CI in one primary school, by discussing the theoretical basis of Beane's democratic model of student-centred CI and then explaining how two NZ teachers implemented this model in their respective schools. It traces the origins of integration in the work of educational philosopher John Dewey and identifies these ideas in Beane's work. It explains how Beane solved a problem that had resisted the efforts of other democratically inclined educators for decades, that is, how to directly involve school students in curriculum construction. The purpose of this discussion about theoretical matters is to distinguish between Beane's democratic model of student-centred CI and subject-centred designs for multidisciplinary curricula, which do not always generate equivalent academic outcomes (Vars, 2000) or foster similar social learning skills and competencies (Springer, 2013).

In the USA, Beane's model of CI has been mainly associated with middle schooling (Years 6–8) but, as

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Beane (1997) has explained, the general theory of his model applies to all levels of schooling. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating that Beane's model is viable at all levels in primary school (Years 1–8). In the process, it presents the narratives of two teachers in NZ who successfully implemented Beane's model of CI in their primary schools.

Curriculum integration and its terminology

CI has been broadly defined as, “a collective term for curricula where meaningful learning activities are designed by crossing discipline boundaries and/ or utilising multiple disciplinary perspectives with the purpose of helping students to create and enhance knowledge and understanding” (Dowden, 2014, p. 18), but broad agreement on a definition remains elusive, thus the concept of CI is generally described as being ambiguous or difficult to decipher and understand (Burke & Lehane, 2023; Fraser, 2013; Springer, 2013; Wall & Leckie, 2017). The literature includes a range of terms for CI including: ‘multi-disciplinary curriculum’, ‘interdisciplinary curriculum’, ‘transdisciplinary curriculum’, ‘fused curricula’, ‘core curriculum’, ‘cross-disciplinary curriculum’, ‘integrative curriculum’ as well as ‘integrated curriculum’ and ‘curriculum integration’. Compounding the problem, some of the CI literature has lacked rigour and has been ahistorical (Beane, 1997). As a result, older ideas about CI have often been overlooked or misunderstood (Bergstrom, 1998).

CI is derived from two discrete theoretical perspectives originating from a century ago (Beane, 1997; Gehrke, 1998). The first perspective is a subject-centred or ‘multidisciplinary’ model first discussed in the 1890s that involves the correlation of over-lapping subject areas (Kliebard, 1995). Multidisciplinary models of CI have often been constructed by teacher teams based on contributions made by the main subject areas (typically English, mathematics, science and social studies) to a common organising theme like ‘Medieval Europe’ but without reference to students’ interests or concerns (Beane, 1997). As such, there is the risk that subject-centred models of CI “fall short of authentic [curriculum] integration” (Mockler, 2018, p. 129). The second perspective is a student-centred model, which stems directly from Dewey's work (1900, 1916, 1936) and involves democratic collaboration by students and teachers during a process of curriculum co-construction and is discussed in considerable detail below (Beane, 1997, 2005).

The origin of Beane's model of curriculum integration

Dewey's democratic education and his understandings about integration Dewey (1916) believed that education is the primary means of ensuring socio-cultural continuity between generations. He argued that a recurring problem of education in a democracy was the “harmonizing of individual traits” of students with the values of their communities, thus he identified the student and their context – rather than subject matter – as the focus for curriculum design (Dewey, 1936, p. 465). Dewey conceived his curriculum based on data gathered in his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1896–1904. He refined his theory of education for four decades. In time, a complete theory of integration could be extracted from his voluminous writings. Three notions of integration were embedded in Dewey's theory of education. These were personal integration, social integration and the integration of knowledge.

Personal integration Dewey's notion of personal integration lay at the heart of his theory of learning:

The mentally active ... [student's] mind roams far and wide. All [subject matter] is grist that comes to the mill ... yet the mind does not merely roam abroad. It returns with what is found ... [with] constant judgment to detect relations, relevancies [and] bearings on the central theme. The outcome is a continuously growing intellectual integration ... [this] is the process of learning. (1931, p. 424)

The key idea in the process of personal integration is that when people learn, they do their own integrating. The implication is that students should not be taught parcels of knowledge that are ‘pre-integrated’ by teachers. To authenticate personal integration, Dewey stated that students should actively engage in fields of subject matter, thus he emphasised the importance of “learning by doing” (1900, p. 120).

Social integration Dewey's notion of social integration was that students should be inducted into society so that the purpose of schooling is to form fully functioning citizens. Dewey promoted the social integration of students by engaging them in learning activities that develop skills and attributes needed in society, such as working collaboratively, solving real-life problems and building self-discipline. Dewey (1916) explained that social integration is achieved via active participation in a democratic learning community, where all students complete a course of general

studies, gain social experience and actively develop skills for democratic citizenship.

Integration of knowledge Dewey (1936) believed that the curriculum should be personally meaningful to the learner and valuable to society. He argued that subject matter should consist of the specific knowledge that is uniquely important to each individual within their community context. Although Dewey did not specifically make a link between subject matter and CI, the point was clear: CI must make provision for both personal integration, which requires subject matter originating from the local context, and social integration, which requires subject matter that will promote the development of democratic citizenship (Dowden, 2007).

The organising centre Dewey maintained coherence within his curriculum design with an organising centre that integrated the curriculum horizontally across the disciplines and vertically through students' developmental phases. Dewey's Laboratory School utilised the theme of a miniature society. This involved active student participation in "occupations having a social origin and use" that Dewey explained were "life activities with which young children are familiar" (1936, p. 466). Active participation and practice in these occupations allowed students to assimilate "into their experience" subject matter which was "communicated by others who have had a larger experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 226). Dewey emphasised the need for community involvement in learning, with experts from occupations in the wider community visiting the classroom. His curriculum was thus "community-centred" and taught students the democratic citizenship skills needed for "[living] in cooperative integration with others" (1936, p. 467).

Integration The term of *integration* was slow to enter the education lexicon. In 1937 one of Dewey's Columbia University colleagues, L. Thomas Hopkins, published *Integration: Its meaning and application* (Hopkins, 1937). This book formalised most of Dewey's ideas and laid a foundation for the development of a model of student-centred CI. Hopkins (1941, 1954) explained that notions of personal integration and social integration only demonstrate their potential in appropriate learning contexts. Reiterating Dewey's ideas, he called for a reconsideration of principles of democratic education where students actively interact in a community of peers and where students are given opportunities to have input into curriculum design. At about the time that Hopkins' third book (1954) appeared, the Cold War heated up. Hopkins was close to providing a blueprint for a democratic and student-centred model of CI but any curriculum that was perceived to have socialist tendencies was anathema in the US American political context of that

period (Cremin, 1961). Hopkins' work lay dormant for two decades until fresh calls for democratic education surfaced (Beane, 1975, 1980; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978). Progressive ideas about a democratic core approach that provides a general education for young people were revived. Lounsbury and Vars (1978) recommended an 'unstructured core' model with problem-based topics chosen by teachers but in this instance the democratic intent was frustrated because students were unable to have input into curriculum design. In addition, the unstructured core model was over-reliant on teachers who were familiar with progressive education and able to prevent subject matter from becoming trivial. Finally, Beane (1997) elegantly resolved these difficulties by proposing a model for CI that enabled teachers and students to democratically collaborate in the process of curriculum-making.

The development of Beane's model of curriculum integration

Beane's model of student-centred CI (1997, 2005) recapitulated the notions of integration identified by Dewey many decades earlier. As a scholar of progressive education and the affective needs of students, Beane was influenced by earlier progressive educators who had emphasised the importance of democracy, human dignity and diversity in the curriculum. Beane's model incorporated Dewey's notions of personal integration, social integration, an organising centre or 'theme', and the horizontal and vertical integration of subject matter. Beane defined his model as:

A curriculum design theory that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area lines. (1997, p. 19)

The notions of personal and social integration were central to Beane's model. These two notions not only address the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also prepare students for active and successful citizenship in a democracy. The process of collaborative teacher-student planning facilitates the process of social integration (Beane, 1997). Beane drew from progressive thinking in the 1930s that had proposed a democratic or 'core' education for young people to promote personal and social integration. He explained that "the middle school ought to be a general education school ... based on personal and social concerns ... with a coherent, unified and complete curriculum" (1993, p. 55).

The structure of Beane's model Beane's model was based on dynamic interplay between: (1) themes generated from the intersections of students' personal and social concerns, (2) relevant disciplinary knowledge needed to explore the themes, and (3) the concepts of democracy, dignity and diversity (Beane, 1993, 1997). Beane developed an inclusive approach to the selection of subject matter for the classroom curriculum that satisfied the aims of democratic education. He utilised themes generated from students' personal concerns and their concerns about social issues. Working in collaboration with teachers, students were asked two questions: 'What questions or concerns do you have about yourself? What questions do you have about your world?' As these questions are addressed, the subject matter of the curriculum is democratically chosen on the basis that it focuses on the theme rather than the agenda of a particular subject area or areas. Beane (1995a) explained that this allows students to access discrete knowledge within the disciplines to serve specific purposes, rather than pursuing decontextualised studies of disciplinary knowledge for their own sake.

Beane grounded his model in the concepts of *democracy*, *dignity* and *diversity* (1993, pp. 64–67). These three concepts provided a philosophical underpinning for the collective notions of integration within his model. The concept of *democracy* represented a commitment to the democratic way of life, thus it implied that the curriculum must be inclusive with subject matter that is democratised by including everyone's input (Beane, 1997, 2002). For Beane, *democracy* was "a disposition or, more broadly, a way of life in which people define and seek personal and social efficacy through full participation" (1990, p. 53). He emphasised that "the curriculum must include possibilities for all views to be heard and for the presence of all people to be recognized" (1993, p. 65). He also believed that *democracy* should value students' knowledge and culture at least as much as academic knowledge (Apple & Beane, 2007; Beane, 1997). The concept of *dignity* was implied by *democracy*. It was aptly summed up by "the idea that all people ... have a right to self-respect" (Beane, 1990, p. 60). Beane argued that *dignity* is a rare commodity in curriculum design. In particular, *dignity* is threatened in social contexts where there is a reluctance to accommodate diverse learning needs. He called for teachers to seek connections with learners' lives so that subject matter is personally relevant and imbues them with a sense of self-worth (Beane, 1993). The concept of *diversity* was derived from philosophical requirements for justice based on "the reciprocity of rights among people" (Beane, 1990, p. 63). Like everyone, children and young people have individual and cultural differences but, as they get older, they develop their own youth culture and, at the individual level, derive meanings for personal and social efficacy in a myriad of different ways (Beane, 1997). Taken together, Beane's

three concepts clarified the intention of his model to ensure that subject matter – and the broader experience of schooling – was inclusive, and thus relevant and meaningful for all students (Beane, 1997).

The implementation of Beane's curriculum integration in the USA

According to the National Middle School Association of USA (NMSA), students who participate in student-centred CI programs "tend to exhibit high levels of commitment, energy and performance, while assuming greater responsibility for their learning and their actions" (2002, n.p.). In terms of enhanced academic outcomes and the development of key social learning skills, the weight of evidence is in favour of student-centred CI as opposed to subject-centred multidisciplinary curriculum designs (Beane, 1997, 2005; NMSA, 2010; Springer, 2013; Vars, 2000).

Nonetheless, Beane's student-centred model of CI has had limited uptake in the USA. The predominant practice in middle schools (Years 6–8) of implementing multidisciplinary units – typically comprised of English, science, mathematics and social studies – has meant that many educators in the USA have assumed that CI is subject-centred in nature. Moreover, the contemporary literature reveals little or no understanding of Dewey's concepts of personal and social integration. Typical approaches to dealing with CI in the literature have been to treat all models of CI as if they are the same, to ignore student-centred models of CI or to create new models of CI without recourse to existing literature (Beane, 1997; Gatewood, 1998). Moreover, democratic progressive ideology has been on the back foot in the USA ever since the Cold War (Cremin, 1961; Kliebard, 1995). Consequently, the implementation of student-centred CI has suffered from suppression by conservatives and populists who prefer a classroom curriculum that remains malleable to nationalistic interests (Beane, 1999, 2013). Despite the presence of some long-lived instances of successful implementation of student-centred CI in individual schools in Wisconsin (Brodhagen, 2007), Florida (Barr, 1995) and Vermont (Kuntz, 2005), student-centred CI has been described as an "endangered species" in the USA (Weilbacher, 2001, p. 18).

The suitability of Beane's curriculum integration in Aotearoa New Zealand

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) has a notable commitment to egalitarianism, democracy and equity (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2007, 2021), which broadly reflects the values and social mores of NZ society. The NZC encourages

teachers to develop local classroom curricula and contextualise the subject matter of the official curriculum within the life experiences of their students. In particular, the NZC encourages approaches that equate to student-centred CI. It states that, “the values, competencies, knowledge and skills that students will need for addressing real-life situations are rarely confined to one part of the curriculum. Wherever possible, schools should aim to design their curriculum so that learning crosses apparent boundaries” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38).

As indicated earlier, several teachers in NZ have relatively recently implemented Beane’s model of CI in their classrooms (Brough, 2012, 2013; Dowden & Nolan, 2006; Dowden & Fogarty-Perry, 2017; Fogarty-Perry, 2017; Fraser et al., 2013; Fraser & Deane, 2010; McDowall & Hipkins, 2019). While Beane’s work probably provided the main impetus for these efforts, NZ has long been regarded as a fertile context for progressive education methods (e.g., McKinnon et al., 1991) and, specifically, for integrated curriculum (e.g., Springer, 2013). Indeed, Dewey’s classic work *Democracy and Education* (1916) and British educator Percy Nunn’s treatise on progressive pedagogy *Education: Its data and first principles* (1920) were on the required reading list for pre-service teachers in NZ for four decades from 1920 to 1960 (Alcorn, 1999). The golden era for progressive education in NZ, when the political context was benign and receptive to innovation, was the 1920–1940s. In this period, the democratic model of CI implied by Dewey’s precepts was widely recognised by NZ educators (e.g., Department of Education, 1943; Ball, 1948), but in practice integrated curriculum was almost always led by the teacher and often subject to eclectic influences (Dowden, 2007, 2011). Instances of integrated curriculum incorporated influences like Montessori’s (1912) ‘method’ approach or Kilpatrick’s (1925) ‘project’ approach and were influenced by colonial politics and eugenic beliefs about ‘social efficiency’ pertaining to race and class (e.g., Bobbitt, 1918), with one outcome being that Māori (Indigenous people of NZ) students were assumed to be destined for manual occupations (Dowden, 2007). Although progressive education waned after the 1940s, inspirational primary teachers such as Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963), who integrated Māori children’s literacy with *Te Reo* (Māori language), and Elwyn Richardson (1964, 2012), who integrated art across the curriculum in his predominantly Māori classroom, gained international admiration for democratic pedagogies which utilised students’ lived experiences to create authentic learning experiences (Beane, 2013). The post-war influence of curriculum theorists, such as Tyler (1949), Stenhouse (1968) and Pring (1976), meant that consideration of CI shifted from student-centred imperatives to subject-centred concerns such as the organisation of subject matter to generate cross-curricular

themes. As such, Fraser (2000, 2013) commented that after WWII, NZ teachers seemed to have collectively forgotten about Dewey’s concept of CI and that the popular practice among teachers of constructing thematic units did not extend to creating versions of democratic CI that required teachers to collaborate with their students.

The study

The remainder of this article discusses the themes that emerged from two teacher narratives that described and explained their personal experience of implementing Beane’s student-centred model of CI in the NZ context. The first author asked the second and third authors to tell the stories of their respective experiences when they implemented Beane’s model of CI. The narratives were generated through a process of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017). The data from these stories were then collaboratively “re-storied” into two narratives by all three authors in their respective roles as co-researchers (Cresswell, 2014, p. 13).

Tony, the first author, was a teacher educator. He was a former secondary teacher in five schools in NZ and had competed a doctorate on the history and practice of CI in NZ (Dowden, 2007).

Chris, the second author, was a teacher educator and a classroom teacher in NZ with a long-term commitment to the principles and practices of democratic education and whose teaching excellence had been recognised by national awards. Her teaching took place in primary school classrooms with classes of students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds – with Māori students representing up to 40% of some classroom populations – in regional towns in the North Island of NZ. She completed a master’s in education, which allowed her to pursue her interest in democratic education. Over time, Chris realised that Beane’s model of CI was closely aligned with the approach she had been implementing in her classrooms for many years (Brough, 2006, 2007, 2008a, b, 2012, 2013).

Barbara, the third author, was the foundation principal of a new primary school (Years 1–8) in a regional town with a significant tourist industry in the South Island of NZ. The school was incorporated in the Roman-Catholic school system and catered to a high income, mobile and multiculturally diverse community with 34 nationalities represented in the school, although Māori students only represented 1% of the school population. Barbara had completed a master’s in education, which sharpened her interest in social justice and achieving equitable outcomes for children. She had identified Beane’s model of CI as an ideal curriculum design for her school because it aligned with her inclusive educational philosophy, and she believed that it had the potential to ensure that every

child would be actively engaged in their learning (Fogarty-Perry, 2017).

The right conditions for Beane's CI The literature indicates that in order to be successful, teachers who implement Beane's model of CI need to have a strong desire to make a difference to students' learning, a sound understanding of the model and sufficient support from their school community. As Beane commented, his model is not suited for implementation by "fainthearted or marginally dedicated" teachers (1995b, p. xi).

In her role as a primary school teacher, Chris had a strong pedagogical philosophy closely aligned to the democratic approach implied by Beane's model, which kept her highly focused and motivated. She explained:

I have always possessed an innate belief that teachers have a responsibility to create empowering and democratic learning environments for students. I believe the classroom should be a place where learning is meaningful and fun, where curriculum is co-constructed, expectations are high, where the teacher causes thinking rather than thinks for their students, and where decision-making is shared.

The educational leadership provided by the school principal plays a critical role in the success or otherwise of student-centred CI (Snapp, 2006). Camille Barr, who was a principal in a middle school in Florida that implemented student-centred CI, believes it is essential to shield teachers from outside pressures. She explained, "the staff don't realize how much feeding of the alligators I do all the time. I just have to keep people off [our backs] long enough for us to do our work" (Powell et al., 1996, p. 51). Even so, teachers who utilise Beane's model are often the targets of criticism and are frequently forced to spend extra time and energy justifying their practice (Beane, 1997; Weilbacher, 2001).

In her role as foundation principal, Barbara made sure that she clearly explained Beane's model to her school community (Dowden & Fogarty-Perry, 2017). She explained:

As it was a completely new idea, Beane's CI needed to be explained carefully to the Establishment Board (who were very excited about it), the parents and the students.

Conceptualising Beane's CI Chris had utilised principles of democratic education to implement student-centred CI

in her classroom before she discovered Beane's model. She explained:

In a class of Years 1–2 students (5–7 years old), I began a unit by immersing students in an activity which triggered their curiosity and led naturally to questions being posed. I used an inquiry process by asking: 'What do you know about the topic?', 'What you would like to know?', 'How could we find out?' and, as we progressed, 'What have we learned?' My students hypothesised, experimented, invited experts to our class and carried out research. The questions we generated were grouped into categories which, when linked to curriculum achievement objectives, led to an integrated unit spanning several subjects.

Chris developed an approach to student-centred CI for young children that used spontaneous learning opportunities or 'teachable moments' (Brough, 2006, 2012). She explained:

Student-centred CI emerged as a result of capitalising on teachable moments which present themselves on a fairly regular basis. For example, when teaching Years 4–5 students (9 and 10-year-olds), an email from a class in England arrived inviting us to correspond with them. I shared the email with my class, which immediately generated a high level of excitement. When preparing, I had decided that this context was worthy of pursuit, as it offered the opportunity for rich and meaningful learning. The class and I subsequently co-constructed a CI unit we named 'e-pals' (email pals) that spanned several subject areas (Brough, 2006). The children had little difficulty generating questions or offering suggestions throughout the unit such as 'Why is it winter when it's summer here?', 'We should see how long it takes to get a letter to England and they could post one to us.', and 'We could video conference them and talk with our buddies, ask questions and share songs'. The unit was not pre-planned. It was a messy working document pinned to the wall which grew as questions arose throughout the unit.

Implementing Beane's CI In time Chris believed she was implementing Beane's model with fidelity. She reflected:

My efforts to create more empowering and meaningful learning environments for students eventually resulted in my practice becoming aligned to Beane's model of CI. In keeping with collaborative teacher-student planning, my students were fully involved throughout the learning process. Curriculum

boundaries were dissolved with relevant disciplinary knowledge employed within the context of the theme. In the case of the e-pals unit, the impetus was issues-based because the teacher in England (who instigated the initial email we had received) had been concerned about his students' lack of multicultural awareness. The democratic process of collaboratively planning the classroom curriculum with my students redressed power relationships and valued them as talented and competent young people in their own right. It embraced the cultural currency they brought, including students with Māori and other ethnic backgrounds. In the e-pals unit, students celebrated and shared their cultures by sharing legends, learning a 'mihi' (Māori oral link to tribal background and ancestry) and preparing a 'powhiri' (Māori formal welcome).

Barbara and her colleagues implemented Beane's model of CI with a high degree of fidelity in their new school (Fogarty-Perry, 2017). She explained:

The classroom curriculum was collaboratively planned by the teacher and students. Subject matter from the local context formed the initial basis for students' studies as the natural (alpine lake) environment was very beautiful and conducive to exploration via CI. Later, as the 'Special Character' aspect of our schooling (related to maintaining a Catholic ethos within the school) emerged, in terms of God as Creator and the community as custodians of Nature, students began to think beyond themselves and started to query the impact of community actions, the health of the environment and climate change; and what they could do to address issues in these spheres.

Barbara explained that she and her colleagues implemented Beane's (1997) design for generating topics for CI but with slightly modified questions:

The areas studied were generated from students' personal and social concerns, by asking the following questions:

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

These questions were grounded in the concept of democracy with all students having one vote on what they should study and with all voices being heard.

Barbara reflected that the democratic nature of Beane's model meant that teaching students about social justice, equity and inclusion – where students necessarily need to move beyond an egotistical perspective – was straightforward:

Students began to develop the values attached to social justice, inclusion and equity. Respecting others was part of the school ethos, which was based on the notion of treating others as you would want to be treated and the fact that we are a family. There was a strong focus on inclusion in the school and involving everyone, no matter who they were. This inclusive ethos meant the school began to attract students with special needs from the surrounding community. Beane's model of CI, which is underpinned by the principles of democracy, dignity and diversity, was ideal.

Barbara remarked that student-initiated projects, particularly fund-raising and social action, were common:

A group of Year 1 children decided to fundraise each month and sponsor a World Vision child, middle school children set about cleaning up the shores of the nearby lake, while senior students wrote to the City Council about installing traffic lights at a busy intersection in the town.

Barbara explained how the curriculum helped develop and enhance students' personal values:

In this way the values of social justice and equal rights began to develop. We had 34 different nationalities in the school, so we took steps to ensure each individual felt included. We had welcome signs at the door in all their languages and we had days where national costumes were shared and foods from different nations were sampled. This all added to celebrating diversity with our multicultural school community.

Positive behaviour The literature of CI often mentions enhanced academic progress (e.g., Vars, 2000) but, because it tends to aggregate instances of student-centred CI along with instances of subject-centred CI, it rarely reports examples of improved student behaviour or enhanced social learning skills. An exception to this trend from within the NZ context was the Integrated Studies Project (1986–1991), which implemented student-centred CI in Years 9–11 at Freyberg High School in Palmerston North (McKinnon et al., 1991). The study noted startling improvements in students' attitudes and dispositions to schooling. For instance, non-Project students were 13 times more likely than Project

students to be referred to senior staff due to poor behaviour (Nolan & McKinnon, 2003). Chris similarly found that implementing Beane's CI created a positive learning environment and ameliorated behavioural problems in her classes. She explained:

As a senior teacher I was given some particularly challenging classes with large numbers of students who had behavioural problems, but I found that when the unit was collaboratively co-constructed, rather than prescribed, there were heightened levels of motivation and engagement, and much improved behaviour. Students were more on task. They even wanted to work in their own time, in morning break and at lunch times.

Barbara also found that implementing Beane's CI led to impressive results in terms of promoting and maintaining positive behaviour (Dowden & Fogarty-Perry, 2017). She explained:

A remarkable outcome of implementing Beane's model of CI was that during my stint as the school principal, minimal time was spent working on behavioural issues. In four years, the school grew from 26 students to almost 90 students and there were zero suspensions, stand downs or expulsions. The sense of involvement and control students derived from being part of the process of collaborative curriculum design led to high levels of student interest and engagement. Students had considerable freedom and choice in terms of how they worked, which made learning interactive and fun. They also had great flexibility in what they studied, how they studied, how they presented their work and how their work was assessed. The teachers ensured students' voices were always heard. Over time, students gained power and control over their own learning and poor or indifferent behaviour became increasingly rare.

Democratic citizenship Beane's model of CI develops democratic citizenship via social integration. The process of collaboratively planning and implementing the classroom curriculum empowers students and teaches them a range of important social learning skills. Chris explained:

My students developed democratic citizenship skills as they worked together, solved problems and shared in decision-making. They also learned the skills of negotiation and compromise and, in the process, rapidly increased their respect for each other.

Barbara similarly explained:

Our students soon showed evidence of citizenship. Social action became an integral part of each unit and taught students that they have the power to be agents of change. Our students increased their level of self-discipline as they learned to include and respect others, especially peers with special needs.

Chris emphasised that with appropriate scaffolding from the teacher, young children are able exercise democratic and global citizenship and are capable of instigating social action and tackling serious issues:

Social issues are not beyond the scope of young children and can lead to powerful social action for the common good. For example, students fund-raising as a response to a tsunami in Samoa (Fraser & Deane, 2010). Another example I know of involved students fund-raising to free children from child slavery in a third world country.

While the development of important social learning skills needed for active democratic citizenship is specifically encouraged by the national NZ Curriculum (see Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10) – and is also a tangible thread in the curriculum documents of the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland – these skills are not emphasised within the comparatively reductionist curriculum documents of some other Western countries such as Australia or USA.

Winning over stakeholders Student-centred CI is not a mainstream curriculum design, thus is it essential to obtain the support of all the stakeholders in the school community. As principal, Barbara developed a broad range of strategies to win over stakeholders. She explained:

As community stakeholders started to understand CI and could see benefits in the lives of children, they bought into the process. Weekly newsletters explained what the children were studying. Each term an invitation to attend an open evening was extended to parents, grandparents and friends, where the children took groups for a tour around the school and explained what they were learning about. Student work was displayed on interior walls, so that visitors could immediately see the impact of CI. Fortnightly assemblies, run by various classes, provided an opportunity to showcase CI units. The media were regularly invited to school events. Teacher reports and feedback to parents helped them to understand the process of CI and realise the benefits to their children.

In the USA, student learning that occurs in student-centred CI units is retrospectively recorded via a process of ‘back-mapping’ which matches knowledge and skills achieved against required curriculum standards (Brodhagen, 2007; Nesin & Lounsbury, 1999). Barbara described a similar process in her primary school:

As a safeguard to ensure the national curriculum was being covered, staff developed an approach to curriculum coverage where we tracked the year’s topics that had been studied and the curriculum areas these fitted into. We then used this information to develop three matrices that demonstrated curriculum coverage at junior, middle and senior levels in the school. In time this became a very useful resource.

From the perspective of a classroom teacher implementing CI in isolation, Chris similarly explained:

Careful tracking of achievement was vitally important for accountability purposes and to demonstrate the effectiveness of student-centred CI.

Sustaining CI Beane’s model of student-centred CI is complex and fundamentally different to most other curriculum approaches. Sustaining this model of CI needs dedicated teachers who understand how to implement it and a supportive school community that is committed to helping it succeed. Chris explained:

Successful implementation of student-centred CI requires significant commitment from the teacher. Where student ownership is strong and motivation and engagement are high, this creates a very positive and rich learning environment. I have found again and again that the time it takes to include students in the collaborative planning process has huge spin-offs for children’s learning and is well worth the investment.

Barbara emphasised the need for staff continuity if Beane’s model CI is to be sustained. She explained:

When I left the school after four years as principal, it was in great heart and the roll had quadrupled. Staff had a clear understanding of Beane’s CI model and were working together very effectively, and I believed that CI was firmly embedded in the school’s culture. However, when I made contact some years later, things had changed with staff resignations and, as key staff left, sadly, so did the commitment to CI.

A supportive culture is essential to sustain Beane’s model of CI. Support from the principal is a prerequisite for success (Snapp, 2006) and, more broadly, any curriculum design needs full support from a range of curriculum stakeholders if it is to be sustained (Moore & Young, 2001). As Barbara discovered, when she visited her old school some years after she had left it, Beane’s model of CI cannot be sustained unless it has the broad and unequivocal support of the whole school community.

Conclusion

This study found that Beane’s model of student-centred CI has the potential to enrich mainstream education because it explains how the curriculum can be democratically designed to cater for diverse needs and dignify children and young people by engaging them in holistic learning experiences that have personal meaning and relevance to their lives. Students learn the skills of democratic citizenship and are given agency to collaboratively engage in the ‘real world’ of their local communities, and thus make positive contributions to building and strengthening their communities. Accordingly, Beane’s curriculum is genuinely democratic, inclusive and socially just (Connell, 1992; Beane, 2013; Riddle et al., 2023).

The professional narratives in this article demonstrated that Beane’s model of CI is viable in primary school, provided that the right conditions are present. Chris and Barbara fully conceptualised Beane’s model and implemented it with a high degree of fidelity. They independently discovered that implementing Beane’s model had a strongly positive impact on children’s behaviour. They also observed that children readily acquired the collaborative social skills needed for democratic citizenship. Although Chris and Barbara successfully implemented Beane’s model, they found that it could not be sustained unless it retained the support of all the stakeholders in the curriculum. Overall, the narratives convincingly showed that, as long as teachers provide scaffolding, even children in the early years of primary schooling are able to collaboratively plan with their teachers and generate units for Beane’s model of CI that are exciting, rigorous and personally meaningful. Chris and Barbara both offered final reflections on their practice. Chris reflected:

Beane’s model of CI is about students learning to live democratically. This only happens in classrooms where teachers have a collaborative relationship with students that empowers them to become active citizens who understand democratic processes. Even young children are capable of enacting the notion of the common good within their local communities.

Barbara reflected:

I believe using Beane's model of CI to launch the curriculum in our new school was very successful. Learning was described by individual students as 'the best education ever'. Others said they 'learned so much' and that there was 'fun in their learning'. Students' behaviour was generally excellent because they were highly motivated and very engaged in their learning.

This study advances the claim that Beane's model of CI can help all students, including young children, to achieve excellent outcomes in the academic and social domains. In particular, it can help students to develop key social skills needed for democratic citizenship, such as the abilities to negotiate, to compromise and to see others' points of view.

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