Reconceptualising Notions of Curriculum: The Case of Te Whaariki

Maggie Haggerty
Wellington College of Education

Abstract

This paper discusses the New Zealand early childhood curriculum guidelines, Te Whaariki, in relation to recent trends in curriculum discourse. The paper highlights ways in which Te Whaariki challenges orthodox curriculum discourse and ways in which Te Whaariki contributes to efforts to reconceptualise curriculum. The paper is structured around four key themes evident in reconceptualist discourse: curriculum as context, curriculum as constructed, curriculum as contested, curriculum as complex. Te Whaariki’s position is discussed in relation to each of these themes. It is suggested that Te Whaariki poses challenges to move beyond traditional, prescriptive, positivist curriculum practices.

Reconceptualising Curriculum

To start with orthodox notions of curriculum is to start with the positivist or prescriptive approach to curriculum, which is widely acknowledged to have dominated mainstream curriculum discourse (Apple, 1975b; Bloch, 1992; Cornbleth, 1990; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Kliebard, 1986, 1995; Miller, 1992; Pinar, 1975, 1988). Giroux (1981) offers a summary of the “culture of positivism” as follows:

...knowledge is objective, bounded and ‘out there’. Classroom knowledge is often treated as an external body of information, the production of which appears to be independent of human beings. From this perspective, human knowledge is viewed as being independent of time and place; it becomes universalised ahistorical knowledge. Moreover, it is expressed in a language which is technical and allegedly value free... knowledge, then, becomes not only countable and measurable, it also becomes impersonal. Teaching in this pedagogical paradigm is usually discipline based and treats subject matter in a compartmentalised and atomised fashion. (pp. 52-53)
Other writers have further suggested that when, as in a positivist approach, curriculum is tightly prescribed, the role of the teacher is reduced to that of technicist (Grundy, 1987; Kliebard, 1986), what some have termed “teacher-proof” curriculum (O’Neill, 1996).

The last thirty or so years have given rise to a considerable, some would say definitive, body of critique of positivism. However, while some observers suggest that we are now in a post-positivist era (Pinar, 1988), others maintain that despite the critique, “positivism retains its hegemony over practice” (Lather, 1991, p. 2) and policy (Kliebard, 1995).

Pinar (1975) coined the term “the reconceptualists” to describe those who initiated the post-positivist movement in curriculum theory. Later, Pinar (1988) acknowledged that efforts to reconceptualise curriculum were grounded in diverse and sometimes opposing traditions. The reconceptualist movement is probably best understood, not so much as a position, but as a questioning of the presuppositions that have for so long under-girded curriculum theory (Grumet, 1988; Miller, 1992). The reconceptualist movement is to do with the shift from a positivist perspective whereby the question: What knowledges are worth knowing? is regarded as an essentially empirical question, to critical and later post-modern questions such as: What is legitimated as knowledge? And how? How do I experience knowledge? Who can construct knowledge? Who decides? In whose interests is this decided? (Miller, 1992, p. 112) Whose knowledge is given preference? What conditions beyond the immediate situation shape the selection, organisation, treatment and distribution of curriculum knowledge? (Cornbleth, 1990, p.191).

Advocates of reconceptualising curriculum are also to be found in early childhood discourse, most obviously evidenced in the annual “reconceptualising” conferences held in the United States since the early nineties (Lubeck, 1996). An early influential text is Kessler and Swadener’s (1992) Reconceptualising the Early Childhood Curriculum: Beginning the Dialogue. As this title suggests, early childhood reconceptualists have not just concerned themselves with challenging the accepted knowledges of the curriculum mainstream, but the accepted knowledges of the early childhood sector itself. Challenges to the hegemony of child development theory to acknowledge diverse rather than universalist and naturalist viewpoints have been key themes amongst increasing calls for sociocultural, critical and poststructuralist/postmodern views on curriculum and childhood (Burman, 1994; Grieshaber & Canella, 2001).

The view put forward in this paper is that it is within the broadly-based movement to reconceptualise curriculum that _Te Whāriki_ (Ministry of Education, 1996) is most aptly located. Carr and May (2000) offer support for such a view. They describe _Te Whāriki_ as “a new conception of curriculum” (p.87) coming “primarily from local and cultural voices”, but “substantially in tune with” national and international voices that were taking an increasingly sociocultural and poststructural stance (p.60). Maori input was particularly influential in the development of _Te Whāriki_, as was input from New Zealand/Aotearoa’s early
childhood sector. *Te Whaariki* was the product of a bottom-up development process involving unusually extensive consultation.

The continuum in Figure 1 below: *Notions of curriculum*, picks up on some of the key themes in the positivist to post-positivist/reconceptualist shift.

![Notions of Curriculum Continuum](image)

**Figure 1. Continuum one: Notions of curriculum**

This paper now focuses on the four reconceptualist themes identified in continuum one: curriculum as context, curriculum as constructed, curriculum as contested and curriculum as complex. With each of these four themes I also use a continuum as a simple means of mapping or notionally locating some of the key shifts in thinking that have occurred. *Te Whaariki*'s position is discussed with regard to each of these themes and also mapped by means of the continua.

**Curriculum as Context**

A key feature of the move away from or beyond positivism is the increasing recognition of the role of the sociocultural context in determining what knowledges are valued and what constitutes valued knowledges. It seems that the further one moves away from the positivist position, often critiqued as disembodied or decontextualised, not only does context become increasingly emphasised, but increasingly particularised. This is depicted in Figure 2: *Curriculum as Context*, whereby the further one moves along the continuum from right to left, the more highly contextualised approaches tend to become. From early concerns with the macro-context, the emphasis progressively shifts toward the micro-context. This paper does not claim to do justice to the complexities of the debates underlying such shifts, but seeks instead to offer more of a "bird's eye view" of these movements. Figure 2's continuum identifies three main waves of post-positivist or reconceptualist thinking with respect to the role of sociocultural context:

Firstly, from quite early on in the reconceptualist movement, there was a considerable body of work which focused on macro-order influences and the role curriculum played in the transmission of dominant culture and ideologies. Central
to this work, much of it grounded in critical theory (Geuss, 1981), was the theme of curriculum helping to preserve arrangements of political and economic power.

Later came considerable critique of such a macro-order focus. One body of critique argued that in focusing on the macro system, the influence of more immediate structural or systemic contexts was being overlooked, or as Cornbleth (1990) put it “leapfrogged”. In keeping with such a view is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) landmark model of “nested environments”, which proposes different levels or layers of context. Another later example of the notion of layers of context is Wilcox’s model (1982, cited in Kessler, 1992, p. 24) of concentric circles.

A third wave of thinking, influenced by post-structuralism, distanced itself still further from what it termed the meta-narrative or essentialising narrative of a macro perspective, and argued instead for multiple narratives, multiple perspectives. Thus Figure 2 also describes a shift in emphasis from commonalities to multiplicities, whereby the left hand end of the continuum represents a notion of curriculum as, to borrow Lather’s (1991) terminology, “incessantly perspectival” (p.xx). Habermas (1987, cited in Lather, 1991) uses the term “relativist”. I sometimes, not altogether facetiously, think of this approach as the “anything goes” curriculum.

![Diagram of Curriculum as Context](image)

**Figure 2. Continuum two: Curriculum as context**

In terms of where *Te Whaariki* stands on the question of context, it is first worth noting that *Te Whaariki*’s conception of the role of sociocultural context is explicitly grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model (Ministry of Education, 1996). Seemingly then *Te Whaariki* embodies a “layers-of-context” approach, which in Figure 2 above is located at the midpoint of the continuum: *Curriculum as Context*. Positioning *Te Whaariki* towards the midpoint of the continuum seems further supported by Carr and May’s (1993a) suggestion that *Te Whaariki* argues, “the possibility of multiple curricula in a common framework” (p.146). This means that *Te Whaariki* straddles both sides of the continuum in an effort to incorporate both multiplicities and commonalities. This is probably the tension Cullen (1996) alludes to, when she talks about the “theoretical tension inherent in *Te Whaariki*’s philosophy between the notions of developmental appropriateness and cultural appropriateness” (p.118).
Developmentally appropriate practice [DAP] (Bredekamp, 1987), builds on developmental psychology’s focus on the child and what is “normal” for children of a given age and proposes early childhood teaching and curriculum practices to match. However as was alluded to earlier, such frameworks have been hotly challenged within reconceptualist discourse on the basis of their naturalism, universalism, ethnocentrism and essentialism (Burman, 1994). As Hatch (1995, cited in Grieshaber & Canella, 2001) argues: “there is no permanent and essential nature of childhood. The idea of childhood is defined differently in every culture, in every time period, in every political climate, in every economic era, in every social context” (p. 14).

What then are we to make of Te Whaariki taking greater account of sociocultural context, while at the same time continuing to draw on the developmental tradition? Carr and May (2000) suggest that Te Whaariki’s support for the traditions of age-related and special needs categorisations, and of spontaneous play and primary caregiving, is not about promulgating universals. They argue instead for re/framing these components as “values” pertaining to the “bicultural Aotearoa-New Zealand...community” (p. 61). Such a position may reduce the degree of universalism, but it still appears to presuppose national uniformity of values. What of differing viewpoints and or different contexts? For example, how does one reconcile advocating spontaneous play “across-the-board”, when as Smith (1996) reports, Kohanga Reo are not accepting of this European emphasis? Such a position seems at odds with Reedy’s (1995) notion of Te Whaariki’s bicultural framework as enabling, “the transmission of my cultural values, my language and tikanga, and your cultural values, language and customs” (p.17).

Te Whaariki was hailed as “the first truly bicultural curriculum statement” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.2) Unlike the Maori versions of subject based curriculum statements of the primary sector, which have tended to be translations rather than cultural alternatives (McKinley & Waiti, 1995, cited in Carr & May, 2000), Te Whaariki incorporates a separate, but linked framework for Maori. Furthermore it was the Maori negotiators within the development group, led by Tilly and Tamati Reedy, who proposed the foundation of a framework of Principles and Aims, which Carr and May (1993c) observe, “in the event...guided the entire later curriculum development process” (p172). As Meade (1995) explains, the development process “start[ed] with Maori formulating the basics...prior to [italics added] the rest of the guidelines being developed” (p.7). Clearly, Maori voices played a fundamental part in shaping Te Whaariki (Pere, 1991). Since then have been: efforts to explore the relationship between the Maori and English versions of Te Whaariki (Reedy, 1993, 1995; Royal Tangaere, 1996); calls to develop a critical pedagogy in relation to bicultural curriculum (Ritchie, 1996, 2001); and challenges to further explore the bicultural/multicultural interface (Rhudding-Jones, 2002). It is beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to the perspectives offered. However such discourses need to come into far greater prominence for this key dimension of Te Whaariki to be critically addressed.
Curriculum as Construction

McWilliam (1995) suggests that the first step to reconceptualising curriculum is to reject the tendency to treat curriculum as “a fixed body of information to be ingested” (p.55). Instead theorists attempting to reconceptualise curriculum focus on the who, what and how of curriculum as social construct and interactive process. So for example, Cornbleth (1990) defines curriculum as “contextualised social process”, comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu (p.7). Apple (1975a) highlights the “hidden curriculum” of underpinning values and ideologies that go unreocgnised and unacknowledged. In contrast to the prevailing product conception of curriculum as a document or plan, moves to reconceptualise curriculum incorporate the “enacted” curriculum, curriculum in action. Grundy (1987) for example suggests that: “ultimately... the curriculum is that which students experience in the learning environment” (p. 42).

Also significant in reconceptualist endeavours to further a view of curriculum as social construct, have been efforts to gain increasing acknowledgment of the role of the teacher in the curriculum development process. Figure 3 contrasts the technicist role of the teacher, earlier suggested to be implicit in a positivist view of curriculum, with reconceptualist themes concerning the crucial importance of the teachers’ role, of professional judgement and reflection.

![Curriculum As Constructed Diagram]

**Figure 3. Continuum three: Curriculum as constructed**

*Te Whaariki’s* close alignment with a view of curriculum as process and social construct is mirrored in *Te Whaariki’s* title metaphor, curriculum as weaving. Note a further mirrored emphasis on “enacted” curriculum and “hidden curriculum” in the definition of curriculum offered in the *Te Whaariki* draft: “the sum total of children’s direct and indirect learning experiences in early childhood education settings...including what has been called the ‘hidden curriculum’” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 13).

With *Te Whaariki* the notion of curriculum being tightly prescribed is explicitly rejected: “...the concept of *Te Whaariki*, or an early childhood programme as weaving, implies there is no set way to develop a programme” (Carr & May,
As Nuttall and Mulheron (1993) note: “Te Whaariki resists the temptation to provide specific ‘recipes’ for centres” (p.1). The Te Whaariki metaphor of “weaving” curriculum positions the teacher as a key participant in the process of constructing curriculum. The Te Whaariki framework principles of holism and social constructionism call upon early childhood practitioners to come to “know” their children in the context of their daily lives and to act responsively in light of that knowledge, in other words to respond in contextually appropriate ways. Bruce (1996), a well known United Kingdom early childhood educationalist, offers the following commentary on the important interpretive role Te Whaariki accords the practitioner:

The understanding of children’s development, the context in which children are educated and cared for, the content, can change in Te Whaariki. It encourages a constant reinterpretation of the fundamental principles, all of which is part of the reframing and reflective process of working with children. (p. 4)

Curriculum as Contested

It has been suggested that the shift toward a more contextualised view of curriculum, that is toward a view of curriculum as a social construct, involved a shift away from a view of knowledge as, “Truths [sic] about, or information in” a particular subject or field (Delandshere & Petrosky, 1994, p.11). Rather than seeing such knowledge as having some sort of objective, intrinsic or universalised worth, reconceptualist discourse began to interrogate the basis of privileging particular knowledges. Thus from a situation in which the basis of such privileging seems to have gone relatively unquestioned, the question, “What does or should constitute curriculum?” has become increasingly contested.

One key strand of the interrogation, is to be found, as Pinar (1988) has suggested, in the growing body of work which focuses on curriculum as a pre-eminently political entity. Lather (1991) argues that such attempts to politicise curriculum discourse are not a matter of bringing politics in where there are none, rather they are attempts to “make overt how power permeates the construction and legitimisation of knowledges” (p. xviii). Knowledge and power, suggests Apple (1991), are part of an “indissoluble couplet” (p. vii).

Bearing in mind knowledge-power dynamics, it should come as no surprise that a comparatively low-status early childhood sector could have difficulty having its perspectives legitimised by mainstream curriculum discourse. Consider for example the way that much of the debate over the legitimacy of early childhood’s inclusion within the parameters of curriculum has revolved around the construction of a care/education dichotomy. The dichotomy seems premised on the basis that one can differentiate between care and education, that they are different and distinct entities. The argument then seems to proceed along the lines that while education is the business of curriculum, that which is “other than” education, in this instance care, is not (Haggerty, 1998). Such a view may be starting to lose ground, but it is a view reflected in what Smith (1990) referred to
as the "hierarchy of status" within early childhood services, in that childcare services, whose focus on care is so clearly part of their identity, have tended to occupy "the margins of an already marginal entity" (p. 14). The flow on effect of such views has been to make childcare services catering for infants and toddlers more marginal still.

With the field of curriculum becoming increasingly contested, a number of writers suggest that this has given rise to a greater acceptance of difference. For example, Lather (1991) refers to the creation of a "plurality of sites from which the word is spoken" (p. 33). Other observers talk of a dissemination of legitimacy, something Hartshock (1987, cited in Lather, 1991) ascribes to "the diverse and disorderly Others beginning to speak and beginning to chip away at the social and political power of the Theorizer" (p33). Indeed, perhaps to some extent early childhood education can be regarded as one of Hartshock’s “diverse and disorderly Others”, in that it has both served to broaden and been accommodated by, the increasingly inclusive parameters of curriculum discourse. For example, there has been some intersection between feminist and early childhood conceptions of curriculum. And it is quite likely that the work of feminist theorists like Grumet (1988) and Ellsworth (1989), which has been instrumental in notions of curriculum broadening beyond the cognitive domain to a more holistic orientation (see Figure 4), has also meant that early childhood conceptions of learning and development, of care as curriculum, have been able to be more easily accommodated:

![Figure 4. Continuum four: Curriculum as contested](image)

What then of Te Whaariki? Not only did Te Whaariki argue the integration of care and education, but it took the contentious stand of world leader, (first-equal with Norway), in proposing a national curriculum statement which included infants and toddlers (see also Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1996). Te Whaariki’s insistence that the parameters of curriculum include infants and toddlers, was further strengthened by a proclaimed development strategy to: "work on the details of the infant and toddler curriculum first, and make sure that the parameters set by infant/toddler material set a path for the older children" (Carr, 1993, p.119). This position not only took Te Whaariki outside the
parameters of the wider curriculum mainstream, but also outside the early childhood mainstream, which has tended to have difficulty with the notion of infant/toddler curriculum (e.g. Bredekamp, 1987; see Haggerty, 1998).

Te Whaariki challenged pre-existing notions of curriculum in a number of quarters. Carr and May (2000) tell of the political resistance Te Whaariki initially had to face, because it "didn't look like a curriculum" (p.63). They report that, "the Minister of Education would not allow the 1993 draft of Te Whaariki to be called a curriculum because it looked so different to the national school curriculum documents" (p.63).

The Education Review Office (ERO) also had its difficulties with Te Whaariki, as is reflected in the Chief Review Officer's comments on the Te Whaariki draft: "at the moment, we would have some difficulty regarding it as a sufficiently robust framework for evaluating educational effectiveness" (Hurst, 1995, cited in Cullen, 1996, p.121). In the long, complex, political and editorial processes Te Whaariki then underwent from draft to final document (Carr & May, 2000), changes were made. The impetus for many of these changes was to shift Te Whaariki from a notion of curriculum as highly contextualised toward a more traditional, universalist stance. Another was to bring Te Whaariki more in line with the school curriculum framework. For example, the reference to hidden curriculum went. Aims were renamed strands and learning opportunities became learning outcomes. As well as helping Te Whaariki better fit the language of the school curriculum (Carr and May, 2000, p. 56), such changes were about getting a closer ideological match. They were about "edging" Te Whaariki toward a more orthodox, positivist orientation (Haggerty, 1998).

For ERO the changes did not go far enough. An ERO (1998) report on whether early childhood centres were "using Te Whaariki as intended" (p.14), expressed concerns about:

- the "broad" view of curriculum Te Whaariki adopted (p.2);
- the "range of different perspectives" it incorporated (p.4);
- its "failure" to give clear direction or guidance about what early childhood providers need to do to ensure that they are contributing positively to young children's educational development" (p.4); and
- an inadequate emphasis on the cognitive domain and preparing children for school, especially in relation to literacy and numeracy.

The report showcases three centres' curriculum planning. All three contain echoes of using Te Whaariki in checklist-like fashion. There is an emphasis on curriculum content and "full", "comprehensive" pre-planning, involving specific matching against the detail of the curriculum to ensure "coverage" (pp.8-9). In short, ERO's interpretation is positivist. There are parallels in the field. Two come to mind: the practice of centres planning to "do" a strand like wellbeing, as if it were a subject like maths; and the "assembly-line" labelling of observations with matching Te Whaariki strand/goal/outcome. If one asks, as I have, why the Te
Whaariki linking and what/who is it for, the common answer is “ERO”, basically to show one is “doing” the curriculum. Sometimes the answer is “parents”. However if one enquires further, what often emerges is an agenda that seems more to do with proving professionalism, than facilitating the sort of parent/whanau partnership Te Whaariki advocates. There is also a danger that perpetually categorising observations by means of Te Whaariki labels serves to curtail rather than promote reflective dialogue amongst those Te Whaariki identifies as key “curriculum weavers”: child/ren, practitioners, and parents/whanau. A further concern is when such mantra-like linking with Te Whaariki is passed off as the analysis and comes at the expense of practitioners’ own.

Curriculum as Complex
The field of curriculum theory emerging from the reconceptualisation process, as discussed so far, is one in which curriculum is viewed as context-bound, constructed, interactive and contested, defying easy description or analysis (Lather, 1991; Sapon-Shevin, 1992). In short, as Figure 5 depicts, the notion of curriculum foregrounded in reconceptualist discourse, is one of curriculum as complex and as problematic. Figure 5 also highlights that a positivist approach to curriculum process is a process of implementation, not seen to include critical appraisal of the curriculum objectives. Reconceptualist discourse emphasises the processes of critique and or deconstruction.

![Curriculum as Complex Diagram](image_url)

**Figure 5. Continuum five: Curriculum as complex**

What of Te Whaariki? A number of observers have highlighted the theoretical complexity of Te Whaariki and suggested this could cause difficulty for the early childhood field (Cullen, 1996; ERO, 1998; Nuttall & Mulheron, 1993). Cullen (1996), for example, argues that unless practitioners are able to grasp the theoretical rationale of Te Whaariki they are likely to fall back on traditional practices, albeit “with an overlay of the new terminology” (p.118). The preceding discussion exemplifies just such an overlay.
Carr and May (1993a) suggest:

It may be that one of the greatest contributions of a national curriculum to improving the quality of early childhood programmes is the discussion and reflection that accompany its development. Another measure of its value will be whether discussion and reflection continue to contribute to the national curriculum, to create changing patterns of individual whaariki, and to suggest reviews of the guidelines. (p.152)

Such a view seems to suggest positioning Te Whaariki toward the critique end of the continuum. On the other hand, what is one to make of frequent references to “implementing” Te Whaariki (Carr & May, 2000; ERO, 1998)? My own view is that the curriculum process Te Whaariki embodies is not the straightforward process that the term implement would seem to imply. It seems difficult to reconcile, for example, with the Ministry of Education’s (2000) notion of using Te Whaariki as, “a springboard [which] establishes principles and strands that give policy and direction for teaching and learning” (p.2).

Conclusion
This paper foregrounds Te Whaariki’s contribution to efforts to reconceptualise curriculum: in theoretical and practical, as well as local, national and international arena. Many acknowledge Te Whaariki’s extraordinary achievements, including: the leadership it offers concerning bicultural curriculum (Rhedd-Jones, 2000); its extraordinarily collaborative development process (Bruce, 1996; Meade, 1995); its level of “grass roots” acceptance (Haggerty, 1998); the way it “motored upstream” (Carr & May, 2000, p. 58), despite massive political retrenchment (Meade, 1995) and the international acclaim it has received (Carr & May, 2000).

Bruce (1996) says of Te Whaariki: “radicals have been allowed to speak” (p.11). I agree. However looking at the range of views under the reconceptualist “umbrella” in the course of this paper would suggest that Te Whaariki’s position is not as far removed from traditional positivist perspectives as some. The paper suggests areas of tension within the document between reconceptualist and traditional, positivist perspectives and identifies how these were exacerbated through the changes between draft and final versions. Despite the tensions, it is suggested that Te Whaariki embodies fundamental challenges to view curriculum through reconceptualist rather than positivist lenses. The paper highlights how such challenges have caused difficulty in some quarters.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Maggie Haggerty is a senior lecturer at Wellington College of Education. Her research interests include curriculum, early years literacy and the use of video and the visual in pedagogical documentation.