



Teachers' Experiences of Curriculum Reform in Aotearoa New Zealand

Lisa Gordon¹ · Megan Lourie¹ 

Received: 22 October 2025 / Accepted: 16 April 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract

New Zealand teachers have faced a period of significant curriculum reform over the past four years. With the government's recent announcement of plans to reform the national qualification, and the proposal to introduce new subjects into the curriculum, we know more change is coming. This may result in role overload for teachers. Role overload occurs when the demands of a role surpass the time and resources available to an individual. Over recent decades, as teachers' roles have evolved and expanded, evidence suggests there has been an increase in stress and burnout rates. This article reports on a small-scale study which explored the experiences of a group of early-adopter teachers attempting to enact *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education in *Te Mātaiaho: the refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: draft for testing*, New Zealand Government, 2022), which was the first of several curriculum rewrites. The findings of the study shed light on the significant demands that complex curriculum reform places on teachers highlighting the emotional and professional toll this can take. The research identified two urgent needs: a greater awareness of what is required of teachers when curriculum change occurs, and a re-evaluation of the way New Zealand policymakers approach educational reform. These findings are very relevant as New Zealand teachers continue to grapple with constant change and the effects of this on their wellbeing.

Keywords Curriculum reform · Curriculum refresh · Te Mātaiaho · Teachers' experiences

✉ Megan Lourie
megan.lourie@aut.ac.nz

Lisa Gordon
lgordon@kaipara.school.nz

¹ School of Education, Faculty of Culture and Society, Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street, Auckland, New Zealand

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand teachers have faced a period of significant curriculum reform over the past four years. While curriculum changes are to be expected over time in education, the frequency and complexity of this recent period of curriculum reform is unprecedented in Aotearoa New Zealand. These changes began with *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for testing* (Ministry of Education, 2022) which was released under a Labour-led government. This was comprised of a curriculum framework and curricula for subject-English and Mathematics and Statistics. An updated version was published in March of the following year (Ministry of Education, 2023). While these changes were referred to at the time as a ‘curriculum refresh’, the curriculum framework (henceforth referred to as *Te Mātaiaho 2022/3*¹) introduced a significantly different set of ideas about the purpose of curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand – to give practical effect to Te Tiriti of Waitangi which included *mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori* (equal status for Māori knowledge).

A little over one year later, after a change in government, it was announced that there would be a further curriculum re-write, and that this version of the curriculum would be “knowledge-rich” and informed by “the science of learning” (Walters, 2024). At the end of 2024, a new draft version of *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum* was released towards the end of 2024. This was comprised of a curriculum framework and revised curricula for English years 0–6 and 7–13, and Mathematics and statistics years 0–8. Another rewritten curriculum framework, suggestive of a more distant relationship between the curriculum and the Tiriti o Waitangi was released in October 2025.

In addition to these curriculum changes the government has also announced a proposal to replace New Zealand’s national qualification the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) with a new national qualification. While this proposed change is not a change to the curriculum as such, the NCEA has had significant effects on the way secondary school teachers design their senior programmes of learning (Education Review Office, 2024). A new qualification system will require teachers to either adapt or redesign programmes of learning. The government is also proposing the addition of new curriculum subjects in years 11–13. These changes are intensifying teachers work in a context where teacher shortages are a cause for concern (Gerritson, 2025).

Successful implementation of any curriculum reform in education hinges significantly on teachers who play a pivotal role in translating new curriculum guidelines into effective classroom practices (O’Toole, 2000). Given the current educational landscape in New Zealand, and the pressure that teachers are under, it seems especially important to engage with teachers’ firsthand experiences of curriculum reform. This article presents key findings of a small-scale study which examined the experiences of a group of teachers who were attempting to enact *Te Mātaiaho 2022/3* while still in draft form. The focus of the study was not on curricula development within

¹ For the purpose of the study reported on in this article, these two versions were considered to be similar enough to treat as the same. This is because the conceptualisation of the framework, with Te Tiriti o Waitangi at the centre, remained the same.

different learning areas, but rather, the way they were working with the new framework. Although Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 was presented as a ‘refresh’, it constituted a fundamental rewrite of the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that teachers were expected to adopt. Te Tiriti o Waitangi was established as the centre of the Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 framework which also included a clearly stated intention of reducing inequality and promoting fairness for all learners. Schools were tasked with developing their own local curricula (within the guidelines of the national curriculum), partnering with tangata whenua to incorporate local indigenous knowledge.

The study aimed to challenge the view of teachers as mere agents of change who are instantly able to translate policy into immediate action, and to reveal the complexities and realities they confront as they navigate the process of curriculum reform. The findings of the study showed that participants felt expected to drive change without the time or support they needed to engage with new curriculum direction. Despite their strong advocacy for the proposed changes, they felt exploited and overwhelmed by the challenges they faced. These findings suggest there is an urgent need for politicians to reevaluate the way they approach educational reform in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In the next section we outline some of the literature which explores the complexities of curriculum reform. We follow this brief literature section with an overview of the study, what we found through teacher interviews, and a discussion focused on the key findings.

Literature Review

There is a large body of international research literature which reports on teachers’ engagement with curriculum reform. Much of this research is framed around what teachers need to effectively implement changes. There is a smaller body of literature which is focused on the effects on curriculum reform on teachers. A summary of this literature highlights two themes which are relevant to the study reported on in this paper. First, curriculum change is demanding for teachers intellectually and emotionally. It is especially demanding when it requires teachers to think differently about knowledge or challenges their core values. Second, there is a need to keep exploring the relationship between teacher stress or burnout and curricular reform.

Research across various contexts—including New Zealand, Africa, Korea, and Indonesia—has consistently found that complex language and concepts contribute significantly to the cognitive challenge of curriculum reform for teachers. Studies have identified issues such as convoluted curriculum language, intricate new frameworks, and an overwhelming volume of new concepts that teachers are expected to manage (Ekawati, 2016; Jones et al., 2004). Teachers who fail to understand either the broad objectives or the specific details of curriculum reforms are less likely to engage with them effectively. This lack of understanding often results in a continuation of traditional teaching practices and, consequently, in resentment and opposition towards the new curriculum, which impedes its successful implementation (Ekawati, 2016; Koopman, 2013). Education change researchers, including Schneider and

Ingram (2006), agreed that successful engagement with curriculum reform hinges on educators having a comprehensive understanding of the policy and its expectations.

Some studies found that teachers may report feeling inadequately prepared to manage curriculum changes, citing a significant gap in necessary knowledge (Ekawati, 2016; Jones et al., 2004). These teachers emphasised the need not only to understand new content but also to acquire practical insights into how to integrate this knowledge into their teaching practices. This knowledge gap often results in difficulties applying new ideas in the classroom, leading to discomfort with their perceived competence and a tendency to revert to familiar teaching methods rather than adopting new approaches (Jones et al., 2004; Molapo & Pillay, 2018). To address these challenges, teachers identified additional training and improved resources as crucial for meeting their support needs during periods of curriculum change.

Research into teachers' experiences with curriculum changes has highlighted the significant influence of their personal values and beliefs during the reform process. For over a decade, studies in teacher education have shown that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning have a profound impact on their classroom practices (Bryan & Atwater, 2002). This connection has been further illustrated by Honig (2006) who argues that teachers operate within professional communities that shape their beliefs, perspectives, and interpretations of policy messages. These influences are not trivial; they extend to both the development of educational policy and its implementation. As Honig (2006) states, "the starting beliefs, knowledge and other orientations towards policy demands, and the places or contexts help shape what people can and will do" (p. 3). This highlights the critical need to understand how teachers' beliefs interact with the broader educational policies they are tasked with enacting.

Building on this understanding, Duffee and Aikenhead's (1992) research emphasises that teachers' values and experiences significantly affect their decision making as they engage with curriculum changes. They argue that a teacher's past experiences, current teaching context, and personal beliefs collectively shape a vision of effective teaching, which in turn influences classroom practice (p. 494). Shizha (2008) agrees that teachers' beliefs and lack of knowledge about a discipline of knowledge determine teachers' pedagogic practices in the classroom. This perspective highlights that teachers are not mere implementers of change; rather, they process and filter change through their individual experiences and values.

Fullan and Hargreaves (2013) elaborate on the complexities of curriculum change by noting that approaches to supporting teachers during a reform often treat all teachers as homogeneous or stereotype them as either innovators or resisters (p. 5). They suggest that age, career stage, life experiences, and gender—all integral aspects of a teacher's identity—impact their interest in and response to innovation (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). This is echoed by Krupp (1989, as cited in Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013), who notes that many professional development approaches overlook the valuable contributions of veteran teachers and fail to consider the diverse life circumstances that shape individual educators. The literature highlights the way in which teachers engage in the change process requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges the interplay of individual beliefs, contextual factors, and past experiences.

Some researchers have attempted to explore the relationship between teacher burnout and curricular reform (Aeria et al., 2018) and contend that this relationship

remains underexplored and inadequately addressed (Ransford et al., 2009). Teacher burnout can occur as the result of role overload which occurs when the demands of a role surpass the time and resources available to an individual (Richards et al., 2018). Over recent decades, as teachers' roles have evolved and expanded, evidence suggests an increase in stress and burnout rates among educators (Ransford et al., 2009). This can be exacerbated by the pressure to achieve favourable assessment results while trying to engage with the demands of curriculum reform (Ekawati, 2016; Koopman, 2013). Research from a large-scale curriculum reform project in Finland, indicates that school reforms often lead to increased workload and demand new competencies, contributing to heightened stress and manifests in negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, and depression. The Finnish research recommends that ensuring the well-being of those involved in reform is crucial for sustainable change (Tikkanen et al., 2020).

The 2022 curriculum reform was especially complex for New Zealand teachers as because it required teachers to integrate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum for the first time. Research in other jurisdictions draws attention to the additional emotional challenge this can pose for educators. Studies from South Africa (Moichela, 2017), Canada (Schwab & Sutherland, 2001), and Australia (Hart et al., 2012) show that teachers frequently experience anxiety, hesitation, and diminished confidence. Teachers commonly report feeling stressed, confused, and overwhelmed by the demands of incorporating Indigenous perspectives, exacerbated by concerns about making errors, insufficient knowledge, and time constraints. Kendall's (2019) study of teachers' experiences with bicultural responsive pedagogy in New Zealand secondary schools reflects some of the findings of international research. The study found that many teachers struggled to move beyond superficial changes and felt their efforts were often tokenistic, failing to genuinely reflect Māori perspectives.

In summary, the research literature showed that teachers sought a comprehensive understanding of curriculum reforms, including new terminology, concepts, and the rationale, and required substantial support to engage effectively. Teachers were more likely to engage with changes that aligned with their personal beliefs and values. However, research also highlighted factors contributing to frustration and a sense of burden among teachers. Systemic complexities hindered their engagement with reform, leading to stress and contributing burnout—particularly for those who felt inadequately supported during reform processes. Research that investigated the experiences of teachers attempting to incorporate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum highlighted the additional emotional challenge this presented. The study presented in the following section contributes to this literature by exploring how complex curriculum reform was experienced by a small group of teachers.

Overview of the Study

This study explored the experiences of a group of New Zealand secondary school teachers as they navigated the Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 curriculum changes. These changes were more than a simple refresh of ideas—they constituted a fundamental rewrite of the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that teachers were expected to adopt. This was a complex curriculum reform which, for the first time, placed Te Tiriti o

Waitangi centrally within the New Zealand curriculum framework, with the intention of reducing inequality and promoting fairness for all learners. Schools were tasked with developing their own local curricula using the national curriculum as a foundation and partnering with tangata whenua to incorporate local knowledge.

Methodology

An interpretivist approach was taken for this study. Interpretivism is grounded in an ontology that views reality as socially constructed and inherently subjective. Interpretivists suggest that in studying the social world it is essential to draw upon our human capacity to understand fellow human beings “from the inside”—through empathy, shared experience and culture (Hammersley & Campbell, 2012, p. 25). Rather than focusing on what teachers created or designed in response to the proposed curriculum changes, this study sought to understand what it meant to be a teacher engaging with a complex curriculum reform. An interpretivist approach enabled an exploration that acknowledged how a teacher’s contexts, personal experiences, and values influenced their responses to the curriculum changes and their experiences as they attempted to enact those changes.

Four secondary schools from different geographical locations were invited to participate in the study, and two or three teachers from each school agreed to be interviewed. The criteria for inviting schools and participants were designed to ensure rich, relevant data. The criteria for schools were that they:

- Were state secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, serving Year 9–13 students.
- Had diverse learning philosophies and student populations.
- Were ‘early adopters’ of Te Mātaiaho 2022/3, indicating they had been integrating the curriculum framework into their school curricula for over a year.

Purposeful sampling was employed to find participants who are actively involved in designing and implementing the curriculum. Participants were invited based on two criteria: that they were working in a secondary school and had an interest in curricular innovation, and that they were already willingly working with Te Mātaiaho 2022/3.

The participants consisted of eight women and one male. Four of the group were either middle or senior leaders and as a group they represented five different learning areas. Semi-structured interviews with each of the nine participants were undertaken in late 2023 to explore teachers’ experiences of working with Te Mātaiaho 2022/3. A range of open-ended prompts or questions were posed relating to exploring a participants’ world view, their perceptions of their role as a teacher and their values. Other prompts or questions enabled an exploration of participants’ experiences as they worked to enact the refreshed curriculum. Examples of these questions or prompts are listed below:

- Tell me about developing a curriculum with a local lens at this school.
- Are there experiences you have had that influence the work you are doing in this

context now?

- What have you had to learn? How has this made you feel? Where has the most significant learning come from?
- What has surprised you? What did you not expect?

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted using inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The initial step involved coding the data to identify key units of information, such as specific vocabulary used by participants to describe their experiences with the curriculum-change process. These codes included ‘future-focus’, equity, and responsibility. Open coding was followed by analytical coding to construct categories that reflected recurring patterns across the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Key Findings

The following section presents representative data of the key findings of the study grouped into three themes:

- The participants engaged with the proposed curriculum changes because they were committed to equity and viewed themselves as advocates for change. It was their belief that teachers can and should work towards creating an equitable education system.
- Despite their eagerness to embrace changes, the participants found the implementing the changes to be very demanding because of the complexity of the curriculum reform. This included trying to understand and enact a new knowledge system and the responsibility of ‘getting it right’.
- The participants frequently expressed feeling unsupported as they worked to enact these changes, citing inadequate support from the Ministry of Education and politicians. This led to feelings of being exploited.

Advocates for Change

The teachers in this study saw themselves as advocates for change, believing teachers can and should work towards creating an equitable education system. This group were very aware of equity issues. For example, Melanie, new to education following a career change, remembered:

I went in with a different lens. If you walked into the top stream class. 99% White with one or two Māori girls...maybe one Pasifika girl...because I was new to education and new to science I [thought], what is this? There is an equity issue going on here.

Interviewees’ responses expressed an appreciation for educators who question and challenge the current model. Camila described the change that had begun at her school: “people have started to question what we [teachers] were doing and started to question the status quo...the senior leaders are advocates for change.” Similarly, Jane described the support she felt to support others in her school advocating for change: “I want to help them drive the mahi [work]...to be part of the movement [and] the change.” Additionally, the responses from several participants suggest that

these teachers value experimenting and adapting to new curriculum approaches in response to perceived gaps in the system. They spoke positively about attempting or trialling new teaching methods, despite the challenges involved. Madeline stated:

You are thinking about learning and experiences in a...different way, just putting a really different lens on it. Teachers get a little bit stuck in a rut, and [we think] this is easy. This kind of works for most of them. So, we'll keep doing it. But I love that the change is thinking that it's not okay. It's not okay to put one lens on it and say, well the majority are doing okay, because...we need everyone, everyone needs to be doing okay.

For these participants, the proposed curriculum changes aligned with their belief and values about what it means to be a teacher, and especially with their commitment to advocate for equity in education.

Complexities of the 2022/3 Curriculum Reform

Despite their willingness to engage with the proposed curriculum change, the participants found the work complex and demanding. Attempting to understand and implement a new knowledge system/mātauranga Māori brought emotional demands. Patrick, Amanda, and Camila voiced concerns about implementing the curriculum changes, indicating their awareness of the significant responsibility associated with this reform. As a senior leader, Amanda stated: “*We’ve taken the responsibility to start with mātauranga Māori first really seriously*”; Camila stated: “*We don’t want to step on any toes, and we want to make sure we’re presenting local history accurately.*” Patrick summed up a common attitude felt amongst these participants:

This change is genuine...the worry is getting it wrong because it’s really important to us. Let’s be honest...language and mātauranga Māori was taken away from people and [educators] are reintroducing it and we’ve [got to] get it right...there’s a big responsibility and there is the fear...just not [of] getting it wrong [but] it’s got to be right because we’re now responsible for something that was taken away.

Several participants expressed apprehension about the possibility of inaccurately using this knowledge. This concern was often described as fear. Sophia, for example, expressed concern about how past experiences could influence non-Māori educators when asked to acquire new knowledge, and how these factors might impact progress.

I wonder for our lot of our teachers...they’re so frightened of isolated experiences or incidents, where maybe they’ve been in the wrong...maybe they’ve felt not good enough and done something that’s born out of ignorance, like just walking straight into a marae [meeting grounds]. And then from that experience, they shut down.

Later in her interview, Sophia reflected on the conditions that might be required for teachers who have this fear: “*I think the starting space has to feel safe for a lot of our non-Māori educators who can be frightened.*” Similarly, Patrick expressed that he believed the newness of the knowledge was causing concern among his department members: “*The biggest fear is not the change itself...They are experts in biology and geophysics, but they’re not the experts in what they’re doing now.*”

The challenge associated with attempting to acquire mātauranga Māori was also expressed by the participants. They were concerned about the magnitude of this task for teachers, both in terms of understanding and acquiring the necessary knowledge.

Kaia reflected on the complexities of being tasked with understanding mātauranga Māori:

It's a whole thing to even navigate mātauranga Māori because of lots of people... it's hard to articulate a culture because everything you're talking about is knowledge and a knowledge system. It's like saying to people, you need to learn about knowledge; knowledge of what? It's everything. It's knowledge of all these different facets within te ao Māori [Māori worldview] and then within mātauranga Māori. There is a framework, a governance framework, which people don't understand. It's like saying, we need to learn about knowledge.

Similarly, Sophia expressed concern about the shift in perspective required to acquire mātauranga Māori describing the intricacies and layers involved:

There is a concept in mātauranga, if you don't go and find it, it comes to you when you are ready. Firstly, the feeling...as opposed to teaching content...it's creating a personal connection to mātauranga Māori...I think that's really important for our non-Māori educators, because they can get quite (and I am saying this from what I've witnessed and what I've been told), frightened to make a mistake. And if they're in that space, they're not actually thinking about how it feels to be in the mātauranga.

Lack of Support

Most of participants in this study expressed frustration with the lack of support to implement the refreshed curriculum framework. This frustration stemmed from uncertainties about future curriculum changes in the sector, a lack of clear direction, and confusion about how to effectively translate the refresh into practice. Patrick used a metaphor to describe his frustration regarding changes to the curriculum: *"We're a political football. Let's be honest. We are a political football, and we get kicked from one side to the other."* Similarly, Melanie described the effort she had to make to interpret the meaning of the new reform in order to support other department members in navigating a new direction: *"You're trying to work out what's going on because it keeps changing."*

Several participants agreed that a lack of support from the Ministry of Education had affected their ability to implement the proposed changes. As a new head of department, Madeline described how the lack of clarity impacted her ability to effectively lead her colleagues:

The last 5 years have been really hard. I think a lot of that stems from the unknown, there has been so much unknown. We are ultimately [in] a space where because we don't get a lot of timely information from the Ministry, and people you would be expecting to be leading the change, we have to make some big calls ourselves.

Madeline was additionally concerned about the impact that a lack of directives might have on her learners: *"I don't think we can sit around waiting for the Ministry to make decisions. Ultimately, it's about the kids in front of us at that moment and if we keep waiting, we're not going to make any difference."* Patrick also expressed frustration with the lack of concrete guidance to support the proposed changes but was aware that the curriculum changes were a new direction for all levels of the sector. Patrick stated: *"We get so little from above. The training has not been good on*

this, but I think they're probably struggling with the training to be honest...we've not done this before."

Several participants expressed concern about the lack of guidance on how to implement the changes at the classroom level and the effect of that uncertainty. Camila was concerned about how to authentically incorporate new knowledge into her teaching and learning: *"It's still a question of, how do I do that effectively? In terms of content anyway, maybe not pedagogy, but how do I meaningfully incorporate this?"* Similarly, Madeline asked: *"How do I seamlessly put this programme together - best utilising the resources? I think it's time consuming, amazingly time consuming."*

The concern about the resourcing of curriculum changes was a recurring theme among participants. There was widespread awareness that these changes required support within schools, and several participants expressed concern for their Māori colleagues. These colleagues were often asked to provide guidance on mātauranga Māori, and this added to their regular workload. Kaia described the collective attitude of the participants: *"When you look at everything that the Ministry wants for mātauranga Māori, that needs a lot of resourcing."* As a Māori educator herself, Kaia had taken on the additional responsibility of supporting her colleagues with the necessary knowledge. However, she questioned why the Ministry of Education had not allocated resources for this purpose. She stated: *"Why does the Ministry not provide the resources to assist you to be able to do what you need to do? Whatever those resources might look like, you know."* This led to a conversation where Kaia reflected on teachers who step in to fill gaps in expertise, supporting colleagues and benefiting learners, especially when there is a lack of resources allocated for making necessary changes. *"The Ministry exploits teachers because it's a selfless profession. Everything we do is acts of service and it's about growth and development, and...the care of [people]."*

Discussion

The experiences of the teachers in this study provide important insights into the demands associated with curriculum reform. In this case, the participants were early adopters of Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 and were prepared to engage deeply with the reform because it resonated with their own experiences, beliefs, and values. Because Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 constituted a comprehensive rewrite of both the expectations and roles of teachers, the workload was immense. The participants developed new skills, forged new partnerships that went beyond the traditional 'school' context, and adopted new methods of working within an unfamiliar knowledge system, all while designing a new curriculum amidst a host of concurrent reforms and continuing to teach their students. Despite their commitment to the changes, they reported feeling unsupported and exploited when it became apparent there was insufficient guidance and resourcing available for effective implementation. This group of teachers observed that, once changes had been initiated, the decision-making process was slow and provided little direction for authentic integration into classroom practices. While they were willing to embrace change, these teachers often felt compelled to make independent decisions as they designed and developed curriculum in real time for their students. They

expressed feeling a burden of responsibility and a sense of being taken advantage of. Driven by a commitment to the growth, care, and development of their students, these teachers felt pressured to translate important policies into classroom practices, even in the absence of adequate resources and timely decision making.

Beyond the challenges of resourcing, however, the findings of the study highlight a more significant demand on teachers. There appears to be an implicit expectation that schools and teachers can and should lead social change by committing to whatever new direction is signalled in a curriculum reform. Any new direction requires teachers to adjust their thinking in some way. The reform that was the focus of this study was especially complex because it required a significant shift in worldview for many teachers. The Ministry of Education described this curriculum reform as a “call to action”, reminding teachers to “hold themselves accountable...to those ākonga who have historically been left behind or situated on the margins” (Ministry of Education, 2023, p.8). Central to addressing persistent historical inequities particularly for Māori learners, this curriculum framework placed Te Tiriti o Waitangi, at the heart of its guiding vision for the first time. The guiding documents specified in the vision and aspirations of the framework are derived from the preambles and articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ministry of Education, 2023). This marked a significant milestone as Te Tiriti o Waitangi assumed a central role in the curriculum framework.

The updated curriculum was positioned as a “catalyst for equity” (Ministry of Education, 2023, p.13), emphasising accountability of teachers to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and prioritising marginalised ākonga (students). This included upholding mutual obligations to protect taonga (treasure) such as te reo (language of Māori people), tikanga Māori (Māori law, customary law, attitudes and principles), and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), with a focus on promoting mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori in the updated policy (Ministry of Education, 2023). For many teachers, this was a new experience. In pioneering changes, mātauranga Māori was acknowledged and granted equal status alongside other bodies of knowledge. Given the challenges faced by the small group of teachers in this study who were committed to social change, it is difficult to predict what, if any, social change may have come about over the longer term as a result of this particular curriculum reform. The shift in worldview signalled in the curriculum needed the support of all New Zealanders, not just teachers.

In addition, addressing social inequities requires broader alterations to the existing systems and structures that dominate both the education system and wider society. However, critics have noted that inequities in student achievement are often constructed by those in power as the sole responsibility of schools and teachers, and reference to external socio-political factors is ruled out (Thrupp, 2014). Locating the responsibility for inequity in education firmly within schools serves governments well by distracting the attention of both educators and the public away from economic and social policies that embed wider inequalities into the fabric of society. Curriculum reform is usually promoted by a government as means of addressing inequity, and teachers are positioned as essential to achieving more equitable outcomes through their enactment of the reform.

Aside from the issue of how much responsibility for social change can and should be located with teachers, there is an issue with assuming that teachers all share the same ideas, values, and experiences. In this study the early-adopter teachers were

enthusiastic supporters of the reform but were aware of colleagues within the profession who were ambivalent about the direction of Te Mātaiaho 2022/3. Shortly after the study was completed, there was a change in government, and Te Mātaiaho 2022/3 was rescinded. The new government has since published new curricula with a strong focus on the development of literacy and numeracy. Given the differences in teachers' individual beliefs, values, and experiences, it is fair to assume that there will be a range of responses to these changes too within the profession. This raises questions about the assumption that seems to be made by politicians and policymakers, that teachers are mere agents who will carry out whatever changes are asked of them. Failing to consider that a teacher's values, beliefs and experiences will always affect their engagement with a particular curriculum reform is a failure to view teachers as autonomous professionals.

Finally, the findings from this study suggest the need for caution. The demands of curriculum reform can lead to a sense of overwhelm or even burnout for teachers. Moreover, abandoning a curriculum reform after teachers have committed significant time and energy to implement changes may lead to disillusionment. The stress resulting from role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict (Richards et al., 2018) during curriculum reforms may pose a significant risk to the profession if it leads to burnout. This study focused on the experiences of secondary school educators amidst a significant reform, which coincided with major shifts in the New Zealand assessment and qualification system, new methods for teaching literacy and numeracy, the introduction of corequisites, the rollout of a vocational pathways curriculum, and the development of a new New Zealand Histories curriculum, all while navigating changes in resource-allocation platforms. Each of these initiatives brought its own set of complexities and pressures for teachers. Reforms do not happen in isolation, and teaching does not come to a halt; changes unfold in real time. In the current context of critically low teacher-retention rates, where adjustments are being made to visa requirements to allow overseas teachers to fill vacancies—alongside provisions for limited authority to teach for unqualified educators—understanding the experiences of the teachers in this study may heighten the awareness of politicians and curriculum developers of some of the risks associated with curriculum reform in terms of the wellbeing of the teaching profession.

While much existing research emphasises teachers' perceptions, attitudes, or analyses of policy, this study aimed to capture teachers' experiences in their own words, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities involved. Although teachers often call for more time and resources, this research shows that educational reform is far more intricate, and that the demands of changing policy and the subsequent expectations of teachers is underestimated. The insights shared by these teachers encourages a reevaluation of how New Zealand policymakers and curriculum developers approach education reform and highlights the need to rethink strategies to prevent continuously burdening teachers with the weight of societal change and frequent shifts in focus, ensuring they do not experience burnout in the process.

Curriculum Reform and the Demand on the Teaching Profession

The experiences of the teachers in this study highlight the considerable work involved in curriculum reform. However, it is important to recognise that this reform occurred within a broader context of other initiatives and changes, each requiring real-time adaptation from teachers and contributing to a substantial workload. And changes continue to be made. The most recent curriculum reform is still in different stages of development across different learning areas, a significant overhaul of the national qualification has been announced, and new senior secondary school subjects have been proposed. It is timely therefore to reflect on the cumulative impact of frequent and significant changes on the teaching profession. New Zealand politicians need to consider the implications of political shifts on educational reforms and strive to slow the pace of change. Frequent, significant changes not only lead to teacher burnout and waste valuable resources, but also potentially creating divisions within the sector. A more sustainable approach to education is essential—one that acknowledges the complexities involved and fosters an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. An approach like this would focus on the overall impact of changes, rather than the implementation of numerous initiatives from various sources without considering how these changes affect the workload and well-being of the teachers undertaking this critical work. Currently we seem to be experiencing rapid, often abrupt changes, with pressure on schools and teachers to implement reforms quickly before the next possible shift in political leadership.

It is time for New Zealand to explore what an educational consensus might look like within a bipartisan education council that stops treating education—and therefore teachers—as a political football (Hood, 2023), perhaps similar to the Finnish model. In Finland, politicians have fostered a consensus across all political parties regarding their vision for a world-leading education system. Since the 1960s, despite changes in government, the commitment to this educational strategy has remained consistent. “We decided together, as a nation, that education is to build a nation—that it goes beyond politics and political power. It’s a common theme and understanding... committed to providing good, publicly financed education for every child” (Sahlberg, 2014, p.3). A long-term education strategy developed in consultation with teachers, supported by all political parties regardless of shifts in power, could enable teachers to spend less time grappling with the demands of constant reforms and more time focusing on the core reason they entered the profession in the first place: their students. This approach could also contribute to better retention of teachers in New Zealand’s education system.

Considering the potential for a bipartisan educational consensus, akin to the Finnish model, offers a promising avenue for future reforms. We argue there is a need for a much more collaborative, thoughtful approach to curriculum reform in New Zealand, one that includes and values the insights and experiences of teachers. By fostering meaningful partnerships and creating supportive structures, politicians could work towards developing an educational landscape that benefits both teachers and students alike.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval Ethics for the research this article reports on was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4th of September, 2023. AUTEK Reference number 23/249.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Aeria, L. A., Siraj, S. B., Sakika, K. A., Hussin, Z., & Norman, M. H. (2018). Burnout among Malaysian teachers in implementing curricular changes. *The New Educational Review*, 51(1), 217–227. <https://doi.org/10.15804/tner.2018.51.1.17>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Bryan, L. A., & Atwater, M. M. (2002). Teacher beliefs and cultural models: A challenge for science teacher preparation programs. *Science Education*, 86(6), 821–839.
- Duffee, L., & Aikenhead, G. (1992). Curriculum change, student evaluation, and teacher practical knowledge. *Science Education*, 76(5), 493–506.
- Education Review Office (2024). *Set up to succeed – How well is NCEA Level 1 working for our schools and students?* <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/set-up-to-succeed-how-well-is-ncea-level-1-working-for-our-schools-and-students-summary>
- Ekawati, Y. N. (2016). The implementation of curriculum 2013: A case study of English teachers' experiences at SMA Lab School in Indonesia. *English Language Learning Development (ELLD) Journal*, 7(1), 84–90.
- Fullan, M., & Hargreaves, A. (2013). Teacher development and educational change. In M. Fullan & A. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Teacher development and educational change* (pp. 1–10). Routledge.
- Gerritsen, J. (2025, February 21). Principals, unions disappointed by 1250 teacher shortfall. *Radio New Zealand*. <https://www.rmz.co.nz/news/national/542599/principals-unions-disappointed-by-1250-teacher-shortfall>
- Hammersley, M., & Campbell, J. L. (2012). Methodological philosophies. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *What is qualitative research?* (pp. 21–47). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hart, V., Whatman, S., McLaughlin, J., & Sharma-Brymer, V. (2012). Pre-service teachers' pedagogical relationships and experiences of embedding Indigenous Australian knowledge in teaching practicum. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 703–723. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.706480>
- Honig, M. I. (2006). Complexity and policy implementation: Challenges and opportunities for the field. In M. Honig (Ed.), *New directions in education policy implementation: Confronting complexity* (pp. 1–25). State University of New York.
- Hood, N. (2023). *Education becoming political football: Researcher*. *Radio New Zealand*. <https://www.rmz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetonoon/audio/2018903631/education-becoming-political-football-all-researcher>

- Jones, A., Harlow, A., & Cowie, B. (2004). New Zealand teachers' experiences in implementing the technology curriculum. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 14(2), 101–119. <http://doi.org/10.1023/B:TEDE.0000020601.40716.a0>
- Kendall, L. (2019). *Teachers' experiences of teaching as inquiry and biculturally responsive pedagogy for Māori students in schools with a low percentage of Māori students* (Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology). <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/ba053f6a-b21c-4615-9fc6-3f22cb4ea9bf/content>.
- Koopman, O. (2013). *Teachers' experiences of implementing the Further Education and Training (FET) Science Curriculum* (Doctoral thesis, Stellenbosch University). <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/e31b7234-3be8-4d9c-96f5-a98539553844/content>.
- Krupp, J. A. (1989). Staff development and the individual. In S.D. Caldwell (Ed.), *Staff development: A handbook of effective practices* (pp. 44–57). National Staff Development Council.
- Ministry of Education. (2022). *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for testing*. New Zealand Government.
- Ministry of Education. (2023). *Te Mātaiaho: The refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for testing*. New Zealand Government.
- Moichela, K. Z. (2017). *Integration of Indigenous knowledge systems in the curriculum for basic education: Possible experiences of Canada* [Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa]. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/25096/thesis_moichela_kz.pdf
- Molapo, M. R., & Pillay, V. (2018). Politicising curriculum implementation: The case of primary schools. *South African Journal of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n1a1428>
- O'Toole, L. J. (2000). Research on policy implementation: Assessment and prospects. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART*, 10(2), 263–288. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3525645>
- Ransford, C. R., Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Small, M., & Jacobson, L. (2009). The role of teachers' psychological experiences and perceptions of curriculum supports on the implementation of a social and emotional learning curriculum. *School Psychology Review*, 38(4), 510–532.
- Richards, K. A. R., Hemphill, M. A., & Templin, T. J. (2018). Personal and contextual factors related to teachers' experience with stress and burnout. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 24(7), 768–787.
- Sahlberg, P. (2014). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College.
- Savin-Badin, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (2006). Policy analysis for democracy. In M. Moran, M. Rein, & R. E. Goodin (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of public policy* (Vol. 3, pp. 123–145). Oxford University Press.
- Schwab, R. G., & Sutherland, D. (2001). *Building indigenous learning communities* (No. 225). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Shizha, E. (2008). What indigenous knowledge? Beliefs and attitudes of rural primary school teachers towards indigenous knowledge in the science curriculum in Zimbabwe. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 20–29.
- Thrupp, M. (2014). Deficit thinking and the politics of blame. In V. M. Carpenter & S. Osborne (Eds.), *Twelve thousand hours: Education and poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 88–101). Dunmore Press.
- Tikkanen, L., Pyhältö, K., Pietarinen, J., & Soini, T. (2020). Lessons learnt from a large-scale curriculum reform: The strategies to enhance development work and reduce reform-related stress. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21(4), 543–567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09363-1>
- Walters, L. (2024, June 20). Stanford lays out timeline for new curriculum. <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/06/20/erica-stanford-lays-out-timeline-for-new-curriculum/>