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ARTICLE

The Subject-English Curriculum War: A Struggle for Symbolic Control

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Abstract

There have been significant changes to the national curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last three decades. Subject-English has been at the forefront of the three most recent changes which have occurred in quick succession and have had different priorities. We theorise that what is happening in subject-English is symptomatic of broader educational shifts and these shifts will also be reflected in the curricula of other learning areas as they are developed. In this article we employ Bernstein's concept of 'recontextualisation' to trace how key ideas from various societal discourses became the recontextualising principles used to formulate and realise subject-English curriculum policy. We begin with an analysis of two key government documents that have given direction to the writers of the most recent English curricula. This is followed by an examination of the following curricula: English Years 0–6, the draft for English Years 7–13, the recently released curriculum for English Years 0–10, and The New Zealand Curriculum I Te Mātaiaho, demonstrating how the discourses identified in the government documents have made their way into these curricula.

Keywords New Zealand English curriculum · Recontextualisation · Curriculum refresh · Knowledge rich · Science of learning

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Introduction

While all learning areas have been, and will continue to be, subject to curriculum change at the whim of different governments, subject-English in Aotearoa New Zealand has had at least three different curricula in just over two years (more if we include different drafts and revisions). Subject-English therefore provides a useful focus for an investigation and analysis of what has been described as a 'curriculum war' (Rozas, 2024). We theorise that what is happening in English is symptomatic of a deeper process of struggle centred on the control of the educational symbolic space. Moreover, because a national curriculum can be regarded as a reflection of the collective representations of society (Durkheim, 2001/1912) – in one sense a 'snapshot' in time of what knowledge and discourses are regarded as most important - the current struggle over curriculum may be an indication that we are also in a period of struggle in relation to national identity. While debates about what content we could or should be teaching in English are important, it is equally important to investigate the nature of this change process. In this paper we identify the principles driving curriculum changes in subject-English and suggest that our analysis offers insights into the significant ideas or discourses which will likely affect the development of curricula in other learning areas.

Curriculum Change in Aotearoa New Zealand

There have been significant changes to the national curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last three decades. The first set of national curriculum documents comprising eight learning areas were developed during the 1990s with the Arts completing the set in 2000. These were very full documents, with detailed achievement objectives and guidance for teachers. In 2007, the eight curriculum statements were replaced by a single curriculum document *The New Zealand Curriculum*, self-described as a "framework rather than a detailed plan" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37).

More recent changes began with the release of *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for testing* (Ministry of Education, 2022)[1] under a Labour-led government. This comprised a curriculum framework and curricula for subject-English and Mathematics and Statistics. *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for testing* (Ministry of Education, 2022) was intended to address the lack of guidance for teachers in *The New Zealand Curriculum* about what knowledge to teach (Aitken & Wood, 2023; Hughson, 2022) as well as giving practical effect to te Tiriti o Waitangi, including mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori (equal status for Māori knowledge).

Just under one year later, following a change in government, the new Minister for Education announced that there would be a further refresh that would involve changes to the English and mathematics curricula as part of the new government's plan to address serious issues facing the education system. The briefing document

[1] A revised version of this draft curriculum was released in March 2023.

from the Ministry of Education for the incoming government had identified several "significant strategic issues for the future of the education system" (Ministry of Education, 2023b, p. 15) and provides the rationale for the curriculum changes that were to follow. Key amongst the issues identified is the intractable problem that "the education system does not deliver excellent and equitable outcomes for all" (p. 15). The briefing document highlights the country's significant downward trending results in international comparisons and the continued underachievement of "Māori, Pacific peoples, deaf people and those with disabilities and those from low socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 15). The briefing document also draws attention to two factors that possibly contribute to this situation. The first of these are in-school factors, including the quality of teaching:

> PISA 2018 scores reveal that New Zealand has some of the largest gaps in achievement compared to other countries and that this variation is greater for students *within a school* than between schools, *pointing to in-class factors*, such as the *quality of teaching*, as an important contributor to achievement. (Ministry of Education, 2023b, p. 15, italics added).

The second factor is identified as an issue with consistency in curriculum and pedagogy; "…we do not have the right balance between enough standardisation from the centre (in terms of supporting what is taught and how it is taught), local autonomy and innovation in local contexts, and accountability for outcomes" (p. 16). Having set out the issues and the likely contributors to those issues, the briefing document then identifies two main strategic priorities – reforming the curriculum and improving teaching effectiveness. The highly structured/prescribed subject-English curriculum that was to emerge can be understood as an attempt to respond to the issues that were identified in the Briefing paper. The new curriculum was to be "knowledge-rich" and grounded in "the science of learning" (Walters, June 2024) and would provide teachers with the guidance missing from the previous curriculum noted in various reports since 2019 (Aitken & Wood, 2023; OECD, 2024).

At the end of 2024, a new draft version of *Te Mātaiaho: The Refreshed New Zealand Curriculum* was released comprising a curriculum framework and revised curricula for English years 0–6 and 7–13, and Mathematics and statistics years 0–8. After a short period of consultation, the English Years 0–6 curriculum was made mandatory for use from the beginning of 2025, while the Years 7–13 curriculum remained as a draft. A revised version of the English Curriculum now spanning Years 0–10 was released in October 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2025b). This most recent curriculum is the focus of the analysis in this paper, but we also refer to the previous versions (Years 0–6 and Years 7–13), and the curriculum framework *The New Zealand Curriculum: Te Mātaiaho*, released in October 2025, as we attempt to trace the development of key recontextualising principles in the documents.

Methodology

In this section we introduce Bernstein's concept of recontextualization as the key theoretical tool for our analysis. Recontextualisation refers to the process by which key ideas from various societal *discourses* – political, social, cultural, epistemic – are adopted and adapted to become *recontextualising principles.* These principles are used to justify and realise educational policy and practice. Discourse, in a Bernsteinian sense, is not just what is said, but the framework of rules that determines what counts as knowledge, who has access to this knowledge, how it is organised, how it is taught, and how it is evaluated (Bernstein, 2000). Moreover, for Bernstein, education is an "arena of struggle" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 206) where advocates for various discourses vie for dominance over particular models of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Barrett, 2024). Bernstein's overarching concept for this process of control is 'the pedagogic device' (Bernstein, 2000), and within this dense conceptual model, the process of recontextualisation is particularly significant - the appropriation, refocusing, and relocating of knowledge from sites of production (most often universities) to sites of reproduction (schools and classrooms). Those in control of this process of recontextualisation have considerable power over the symbolic space of education in that "what is recontextualised through the pedagogic device and contained within discourse is not only knowledge, however, but also 'consciousness', 'practices' and 'identities' (Hordern, 2021, p. 4).

Bernstein (2000) theorises that the recontextualisation process is enacted in two fields – an official recontextualising field (ORF) comprising the state and its policy agents (e.g. a Ministry of Education) and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (sites of knowledge reproduction such as schools). The ideas that gain prominence and have effect in these contexts are described by Bernstein (2000) as 'recontextualising principles'. In this article we are interested in the recontextualising principles in the ORF. Recontextualising principles are the key ideas and theories that are adopted by those at work for the government in the official recontextualising field (ORF). The 'agents' working in the ORF draw from multiple and often complex disciplinary, socio-cultural cultural, and political discourses as well as academic theories to create outputs usually structured by more specific and concrete recontextualising principles. The recontextualising principles are used to justify and structure the curriculum and therefore enact a form of symbolic control over curriculum conceptualisation.

Curriculum analysis that uses recontextualisation as a tool can include drawing on research literature and policy documents to identify prominent discourses in the area of research, and content analysis to identify recontextualising principles derived from the discourses that are evident in a curriculum document (see for example Singh et al., 2013). Our analysis followed a similar two-step approach and is described below.

Analysis Step 1

Our analysis began by taking two key phrases that were being used to describe the revised subject-English curriculum "knowledge-rich" and "science of learning" and provisionally identifying these as recontextualising principles. In order of us to be

more assured that they were recontextualising principles, we wanted to be able to connect these phrases to wider discourses that might be circulating in the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF). We began this process by examining the content of two key government documents which gave direction to the current curriculum reforms: The report from the Ministerial Advisory Group (New Zealand Government, March 2024b), and The Minister of Education's priorities *(*Office of the Minister of Education, 2024). We looked to see if the terms "knowledge-rich" and "science of learning", were prioritised, repeated, or used to justify recommendations. We also looked for any other terms that were being used this way but were unable to find any. 'Knowledge-rich' and 'science of learning' recur in both the MAG report and the Minister's paper which led us to hypothesise they were likely to be recontextualising principles and as such, representative of wider discourses. At the same time we engaged with literature to explore what these wider discourses might be and we worked iteratively between the literature and the government documents until we were satisfied with our identification of the recontextualising principles and the discourses they were derived from. Our analysis suggests that the 'knowledge rich' and 'science of learning' labels signify recontextualising principles derived from two broader discourses which we refer to as 'the knowledge turn' discourse, and the 'cognitive psychology' discourse. Below we provide an overview of each of these discourses and how they appeared in the two government documents.

The Knowledge Turn and a *Knowledge Rich* Curriculum

The 'knowledge turn' refers to a discourse concerned with a renewed emphasis in research and policy on the importance of knowledge in education (Young, 2008). The knowledge turn was to some degree a response to the dominance of soft skills and generic competencies in international curricula. The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) reflected these international trends in deemphasising curriculum content in favour of genericism reflecting an approach Biesta (2012) has termed 'learnification'. In *learnification* knowledge and learning are conflated in constructivist confusions (McPhail, 2015) between pedagogy (how teaching is approached) and curriculum (what is to be learnt) with what Biesta describes as a resultant 'disappearance of the teacher'. These were international trends (Lourie, 2020) initially considered strengths, that in short space of time are now considered weaknesses (Hughson, 2022) or at least problematic (Aitken & Wood, 2023; OECD, 2024). A number of publications began to appear that examined approaches to curriculum organisation in various countries in a general reassessment of the skills and competencies approach (e.g. Biesta and Priestley (2013); Priestley & Sinnema, 2014; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). Even the OECD with its history of advocacy for skills and competencies, has made a marked a shift to advocating for access to disciplinary knowledge in its *Learning Compass 2030* (OECD, 2019; Hughson & Wood, 2020).

While the knowledge-turn was to some degree a response to the dominance of genericism in curricula, there was also a significant response grounded in epistemology within the field of social realism (Moore 2007a & 2007b; 2013). The central concern within social realism was with knowledge – its types and forms - as a 'blind

spot' within the sociology of education and curriculum studies (Maton, 2014). This concern with knowledge has resulted in a great deal of research under the umbrella of an approach known as social realism about how the structure of specialised knowledge taught in schools has a significant interrelationship to pedagogy, sociocultural knowledge, and equity (Maton & Moore. 2010). Social realists emphasise the importance of the recontextualisation of disciplinary knowledge as school subjects as the focus for curriculum design (Hordern, 2021;McPhail, et al. 2025a & 2025b), however, in some instances social realism has been mistaken as a call for tight control over content and a conservative educational agenda (Hughson, 2022; Philpott. 2022).

Within the context of the discourse of 'the knowledge turn', the term 'knowledge-rich' has become a catch phrase used internationally. An internet search shows a number of educational organisations and individuals use the term which varies with the context but most often 'knowledge-rich' is linked with the idea of content specification (McPhail, 2025a & 2025b). Perhaps the most elaborated explanation of 'knowledge-rich' is that provided by Surma et al. (2025). These authors suggest that four elements are significant in developing a knowledge-rich curriculum: "(a) which content to select; (b) on what basis choices can be made; (c) how hierarchy and structure in knowledge have an impact on sequence; and (d) how to balance knowledge and skills …" (p. 84).

A more nuanced, epistemological definition of knowledge-rich emerged in the *Knowledge-Rich School Project* (Rata 2020, 2021a) and in the development of the *Curriculum Design Coherence Model* (CDC Model) (see Rata 2021b; author) in New Zealand. In this particular context 'knowledge-rich' is elaborated as a multi-layered layered concept referring to the significance of disciplinary derived specialised subject concepts as the key driver for curriculum design as well as the interrelationship between concepts, content, and skills (see author). The New Zealand *Knowledge-Rich School Project* included curriculum design work that built and continues to build on the scholarship associated with the social realist 'knowledge turn' in education (Young, 2008, 2013) such as the emergence of Young's curriculum principle of 'powerful knowledge' (Muller, 2022; Young & Muller, 2013, 2019; Young et al., 2014; McPhail, 2021)[2].

The phrase 'knowledge rich' appears once in the MAG report (p. 5) ("Teachers need clear, knowledge rich and well sequenced curriculum documents.…) but eight times in the Minister's priorities (e.g. "My plan involves starting with developing a world-leading and knowledge-rich curriculum" p. 2). However, the phrase remains undefined in both documents, but we find it co-located with other concepts. The first is *content*, calling to mind the well-known E.D. Hirsh approach to curriculum design in the USA[3] with the Minister stating "my main priority is shifting to a curriculum that is knowledge rich and specific about the content that needs to be taught …"(p. 8). We also see knowledge-rich co-located with curriculum structure and pedagogy; "My plan involves starting with developing a world-leading and knowledge-rich cur-

[2] Elizabeth Rata was the leader of the New Zealand *Knowledge-Rich School Project* and is a member of the MAG so we were interested to see if this conceptualisation of knowledge was evident in the subject-English curricula.

[3] www.coreknowledge.org.

riculum to provide structured and consistent approaches to teaching and learning" (p. 2) (see also Moss, 2025).

Cognitive Psychology and the *Science of Learning*

In the Minister's Priorities for Education (Office of the Minister of Education, 2024) the phrase 'knowledge-rich' is paired with 'the science of learning' and the two become a recurring double binomial phrase: "Establishing a knowledge-rich curriculum grounded in the science of learning" (p. 2). Moreover, the MAG report (New Zealand Government, 2024b) notes that in accordance with its Terms of Reference, "evidence from the science of learning has been brought to bear to the greatest extent possible" (p. 7) in the development of "new curricula and teaching advice for literacy, English and maths" (p. 4). The science of learning then is the most prominent idea in the MAG report with a resulting emphasis on 'the how' of teaching and learning (pedagogy). The introduction of the report claims that "teaching practices have not kept pace with research from cognitive psychology and other disciplines – the science of learning" (p. 4) and a section of the report (1.3) is devoted to explaining the key ideas of the science of learning field.

The report (New Zealand Government, 2024b) states "the 'science of learning' may be broadly construed as application of cognitive psychology in educational settings" (p. 6). This includes numerous areas of research including human perception, memory, attention, language, motor functioning, motivation, neurodiversity, and the affective (emotional) factors that influence learning. Cognitive psychology draws on neuroscience and both areas are complex. Ideas from these areas have been recontextualised into education under various names such as the science of learning (SoL) (Horvath et al., 2016), educational neuroscience (Jamaludin et al., 2019), Mind Brain Education (Steenbeek & van Geert, 2015) and learning science (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). One of the key theories drawn on from cognitive and educational psychology in the MAG report is cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2016, 2024; Sweller et al., 2019) which Johnston (the Chair of the MAG) has noted elsewhere as significant:

> Perhaps the most general educational principle from the science of learning is that knowledge that is essential to later learning must be reliably consolidated in long-term memory before attempting to build on it. Failure to do that risks overwhelming students' short-term 'working' memory, leading to feelings of confusion, frustration and, eventually, demotivation (Johnston, 2024, n.p.)

The MAG outline in some detail the way in which the science of learning should be embedded in the curriculum. The key structures they recommend are teaching sequences, teaching methods, and assessment 'checkpoints'. The aim is for the teaching methods sections to "describe ways of teaching the content specified in the sequences based on the science of learning" (p. 10). The key concepts from the science of learning literature highlighted in the report are working memory, cognitive load, schema formation, and explicit teaching. The report also notes the importance of formative assessment and feedback.

Analysis Step 2

In the second step of our analysis, we employed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the curricula for English Years 0–6, and English Years 7–13. As we were completing this analysis, a newer English curriculum (English Years 0–10) was released along with a revised curriculum framework *The New Zealand Curriculum: Te Mātaiaho* (Ministry of Education, 2025c). We decided to undertake a new analysis focusing on the most recent English curriculum – English Years 0–10 but include reference to the earlier curricula and to the revised curriculum framework.

Findings

Recontextualising Principles in English Y0-10, English Y7-13, and in Te Mātaiaho

The documents that were examined in the previous section made it clear that the recontextualising principles of 'knowledge-rich' and 'science of learning' would be utilised in the development of curriculum materials. In this section we present evidence of the presence of these principles in all the curriculum documents we looked at: English Years 0–6, English Years 0–10, English Years 7–13, and in *The New Zealand Curriculum: Te Mātaiaho* (henceforth Te Mātaiaho).

The principles were announced explicitly in header for *The Overview* of English Years 0–6 (Ministry of Education, 2024a); "The New Zealand curriculum - knowledge-rich, informed by the science of learning, and framed within the whakapapa of Te Mātaiaho" (Ministry of Education, 2024a, p. 5) and three further times in this initial curriculum document. Interestingly, in the most recent iteration - English Years 0–10 – these principles have been removed and placed in Te Mātaiaho – which is the over-arching framework for the various learning area documents.

In **Te Mātaiaho** (Ministry of Education, 2025c) knowledge-rich appears as the overarching structural concept for the Learning Areas "A knowledge-rich curriculum builds students' understanding by carefully sequencing disciplinary knowledge and practices in each learning area". (p. 6). Knowledge-rich also appears as part of the Mātairangi, the guiding kaupapa: "Excellent and equitable outcomes, reflecting the Treaty of Waitangi | Te Tiriti o Waitangi, for every student through inclusive, knowledge-rich teaching and learning informed by the science of learning" (p. 3). Moreover, the 'return' to knowledge (Young, 2008) conceptualised as conceptual and applied (practices) is explicitly noted in the Purpose statement: "the curriculum focuses on disciplinary content – sequenced, coherent, conceptual knowledge and practices" (Ministry of Education, 2025c, p. 5).

The phrase science of learning appears eight times, not only paired with knowledge-rich but also alone as a key indicator of the underpinning approach for pedagogy. The distinction between curriculum and pedagogy (e.g. p. 6 in the Learning Area Structure diagram) is a theoretical distinction most likely drawn from the work of social realists (e.g. Young, 2010a & 2010b) for whom the distinction is considered important in effective educational design before the two dimensions (content and pedagogy) meet in practice (i.e. the what and the how of teaching). The science of

learning is described as helping teachers "understand the key characteristics of how people learn, to inform teaching practice" (p. 6). Five key characteristics of effective teaching from the wider 'science of teaching' literature are highlighted on page 15 under the heading "explicit teaching".

Knowledge-Rich in English Years 0–10

While the exact phrase knowledge-rich is no longer present in the English Years 0–10 curriculum we claim that it remains a recontextualising principle primarily realised through the detailed description of content and the sequencing of that content: "The year-by-year teaching sequence lays out the knowledge and practices to be taught each year." (Ministry of Education, 2025b, p. 5). Learning area content is organised into four phases of learning with each Phase containing Teaching Sequence Guidance for the various Strands - oral language, reading, and writing in the first three phases (covering years 0–8) and text studies and language studies in Phases 4 and 5. The knowledge signalling - the indication of what is to be taught and when - is achieved through sequencing of staged "knowledge" and "practices" indicative of the underlying principle of knowledge-rich; "The year-by-year teaching sequence lays out the knowledge and practices to be taught each year. In the English Learning Area, the teaching sequence is organised into strands" (Ministry of Education, 2025b, p. 4). The differentiation of substantive and conceptual knowledge ("knowledge") and applied knowledge ("practices" - also "concepts and skills" on p. 3) appears to be a categorisation derived from the CDC Model (Rata 2021b) which in turn is derived from more classic definitions from epistemology such as Ryle (1945) and more recent iterations (Winch, 2017). Knowledge is defined as "facts, concepts, principles, and theories" while practices include "skills, strategies, and applications" (p. 10). The *Understand-Know-Do (UKD* Model (Aitken & Wood, 2023; McPhail et al., 2023) present in the 0–6 curriculum has gone, replaced by a simplified structure of knowledge and practices.

Further evidence of the recontextualising principle of knowledge-rich appears in both tacit and explicit references to disciplinary knowledge. For example, in the *Introduction* (p. 4) it is clearly stated that a key purpose of the curriculum from Year 7 onwards is "guiding students toward subject-English disciplinary knowledge" (Ministry of Education, 2025b). In the *Purpose Statement* (p. 3), it is stated that the curriculum aims to provide students with knowledge of "the codes and conventions of language and texts" and the opportunity to put this knowledge to work as students "create their own texts". The aim is that students "become discerning textual critics" and "learn how to craft texts that express their ideas…". These statements are indicative of a disciplinary conception of the subject, in other words knowledge-rich. In the *Introduction* (p. 5) it is noted that in Years 7–8 "teaching provides explicit instruction in oral language, reading, and writing, guiding students toward *subject-English disciplinary knowledge" (emphasis added) and* in Phase 2 there is explicit reference to English as a discipline: "new vocabulary learning will centre on discipline-specific words and words that express abstract concepts" (p. 31). Moreover "In Years 9–10 teaching advances students' subject-English disciplinary knowledge through integrated study of texts and language" (p. 5).

The disciplinary focus increases in the progression of the Phases. Where structured literacy is the emphasis early on, by Phase 4 the knowledge categories are clearly more discipline specific with Text Studies and Language Studies. These categories include a broadening in the range of text forms aimed at building understanding of "textual features, literary techniques, and the impact of historical, cultural, and social contexts on texts" as well as providing students with opportunities to learn "how to craft written, visual, and oral texts for a variety of purposes and audiences" (Ministry of Education, 2025b, p. 4). The emphasis here reflects a mix of disciplinary derived approaches to subject English including basic skills, functional language studies, and cultural heritage (Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2009).

Science of Learning in English Years 0–10

In the 2024 version of the English curriculum- English Years 0–6 (Ministry of Education, 2024a) it was announced that "the science of learning informs curriculum sequencing and teaching practice" (p. 5). While this statement has been removed in the English Years 0–10 version, the emphasis on explicit teaching, the sequencing of knowledge, and the emphasis in the early phases on 'structured literacy' are evidence of the science of learning recontextualising principle at work. The idea of 'explicit teaching' has been carried across from the English Years 0–6 Years (p. 21) to Te Mātaiaho (Ministry of Education, 2025c, p. 16) drawing on and elaborating several science of learning principles in five pedagogical approaches: " connecting the current focus to previous learning, providing concise, step-by-step explanations, accompanied by student input and discussion, explaining, modelling, and demonstrating, regularly checking for understanding and providing feedback, and providing opportunities for collaborative and independent practice (Ministry of Education, 2025c, p. 16).

The science of learning also encourages teachers to take account of sequencing as a means to manage cognitive load. The concept of cognitive load is mentioned five times in English Years 0–10 and three times in Te Mātaiaho indicating its presence as a fundamental pedagogical concept. The importance of building on prior knowledge to take account of cognitive load is also highlighted throughout English Years 0–10 because "what students already know shapes how they understand new information, making knowledge itself a powerful tool for meaning-making" (Ministry of Education, 2025b, pp. 7, 26, 40, 52).

The section in English Years 0–10 on assessment (Ministry of Education, 2025b, pp. 59–62) identifies key concepts from science of learning theories including explicit teaching, scaffolding, knowledge application and consolidation, formative assessment, and targeted feedback. The structured literacy approach integrated through the curriculum (e.g. the use of phonics checks and particular assessment tools for regular assessment of reading and writing) is indicative of the science of learning recontextualising principle because of its highly structured characteristics. Tāhūrangi, the New Zealand curriculum website, says the following about structured literacy:

> Systematically and explicitly teaching the elements of structured literacy approaches to novice learners strengthens their understanding, helps to man-

age their cognitive load, and maximises their progress in acquiring literacy. Structured literacy approach elements include oral language, phonemic awareness, systematic synthetic phonics, handwriting, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, fluency, text structure, writing processes, and comprehension (Ministry of Education, 2024b, n.p.).

Recontextualising Principles in the English Years 7–13 (Draft)

In the section above we have presented evidence of the science of learning and knowledge rich recontextualising principles in English Years 0–6, English Years 0–10, and in Te Mātaiaho. In this section we look briefly at the English Years 7–13 draft (Ministry of Education, 2025a). Evidence of both the knowledge-rich and science of learning recontextualising principles can be found in this area of the curriculum as well, with knowledge-rich being the more prominent recontextualising principle.

Knowledge-Rich

The Years 7–13 draft begins with a Purpose Statement which foregrounds knowledge "The English learning area equips students with knowledge of the codes and conventions of literacy, language, and texts". The term knowledge is used five times throughout the purpose statement and the whakataukī that accompanies the purpose statement also refers to knowledge; "Whaowhia te kete mātauranga. Fill the knowledge basket" (p. 5). The knowledge-rich dimension is particularly visible from Phase 5 (Year 11) onwards where knowledge categories are more discipline specific - Language Studies and Text Studies - elaborated through crafting texts, oral communication, text analysis, critical analysis, and responding to texts. The overview of the Learning Area structure notes this shift stating "Phases 4 and 5 have no specified teaching considerations, as the focus shifts to discipline-specific teaching and learning" (Ministry of Education, 2025a, p. 9).

The knowledge-rich principle in the English Years 7–13 draft is evident in the recurring explicit links to 'disciplinary knowledge' - the source of the specialised and systemised concepts and content (McPhail, 2025a & 2025b). Although it is generally accepted that school subjects are recontextualizations of disciplinary knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Hordern, 2021), the term 'disciplinary' highlights the link to the specialised knowledge which is important in the social realist argument for 'bringing knowledge back in' (Young, 2008). There are two references to 'discipline-specific' knowledge, and three references which include 'disciplinary English', such as, "greater emphasis on students developing their disciplinary English knowledge and skills" (p. 9) and "students further refine their disciplinary English skills" (p.9).

Further evidence of the 'knowledge-rich' principle can be seen in the reference to the selected the content indicated through 'text requirements', which aim to support students' capacity both comprehend and create writing that draws on and utilises disciplinary conventions and practices. The strong presence of particular content - content aimed at elaborating the key concepts - is also a hallmark of a knowledge-rich approach (Rata 2021a & 2021b).

Science of Learning

The English Years 7–13 draft also offers evidence of the science of learning as a recontextualising principle. There is the same emphasis on explicit teaching and its characteristics as there is in English Years 0–10 and Te Mātaiaho. For example, there is reference to "a structured, carefully sequenced approach to teaching" (p. 11) with the explanation that "explicit teaching takes account of cognitive overload. With sufficient practice, new learning is transferred to long-term memory. This frees up working memory, opening up opportunities for extension, enrichment, and new learning" (p. 11). Even though the emphasis in Phases 5 is on developing English literacy skills in relation to literature, science of learning ideas maintain a presence. For example, the importance of scaffolding and decoding skills are highlighted "[students] need scaffolded access to year-level texts so that the development of their content knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension skills is not restricted to the level of their decoding skills" (Ministry of Education, 2025a, p. 61).

In summary, the findings we have presented in this section indicate there is strong evidence of both the knowledge-rich and science of learning recontextualising principles in Te Mātaiaho, and the different English curricula we have examined. However the balance between the two recontextualising principles is not the same in each curriculum document. Both science of learning and knowledge-rich appear evenly represented in English Years 0–6 and the more recent English Years 0–10, perhaps because of the focus on structured literacy in the early phases. In English Years 7–13 (draft), knowledge-rich appears to be the more dominant recontextualising principle, especially in Phase 5 onwards. This is apparent in the references to disciplinary knowledge, the sequencing of knowledge, the selection of content, and the development of a disciplinary identity. This curriculum is currently in a consultation phase so it remains to be seen whether the final version will be remain similar to the draft.

An Absence of Other Recontextualising Principles

A significant finding that emerged from our analysis is that there appears to be an absence of any other easily identifiable recontextualising principles in the subject-English curricula or in the New Zealand Curriculum | Te Mātaiaho (2025c). Because of the extensive presence of mātauranga Māori in the first of the refreshed curriculum *Te Mātaiaho: The refreshed New Zealand curriculum* (2023a), we were particularly interested in looking for evidence of a recontextualising principles reflective of a bicultural identity discourse in the documents we examined. *Te Mātaiaho: The refreshed New Zealand curriculum* (2023a) had a very strong recontextualising principle of social justice derived from a bicultural discourse which acknowledged the need to decolonise and indigenise the curriculum (Estellés et al., 2024). This curriculum reflected a 'thicker form of [social] justice' (Hughson, 2022) evident in the Principles section which called for "a shift from acknowledgement to authentic understanding and valuing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles" (p. 14). Other evidence of the social justice recontextualising principle included an emphasis on schools forming partnerships with local iwi and giving equal status to mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge).

The New Zealand Curriculum | Te Mātaiaho (2025c) has retained the name "Te Mātaiaho", and its whakapapa reflected in the original circular design. The Māori terms for the different elements of the whakapapa have also been retained. However, there has been a clear shift away from the social justice recontextualising principle that was evident in the original. In the original version Mātairangi (The Guiding Kaupapa) is explained as "The overarching kaupapa, expressing the centrality of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles, and New Zealand's vision for education" (Ministry of Education, March, 2023a p. 6). In the New Zealand Curriculum | Te Mātaiaho (2025c) this has been replaced with the following statement: "Excellent and equitable outcomes, reflecting the Treaty of Waitangi | Te Tiriti o Waitangi, for every student through inclusive, knowledge-rich teaching and learning informed by the science of learning" (p. 3). While we were not confident that we could identify a 'new' recontextualising principle relating to relationship between Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the curriculum in the documents we examined, we can see there is evidence of a broader shift occurring that de-emphasises the role of Te Tiriti o Waitangi within education. For example, the New Zealand government has recently removed the legal requirement for school boards to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This shift deserves careful consideration and further analysis beyond the scope of this article.

Concluding Remarks

In the opening of the paper, we briefly outlined the way in which Bernstein theorises the process of symbolic control in education – the fields in which ideas are made visible, contested, and recontextualised – "an arena of struggle" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 206). We have outlined how agents of the state in the New Zealand Official Recontextualising Field are currently in control of the pedagogic device, driving curriculum change in the direction of greater standardisation via the dominance of two recontextualising principles. This direction is clearly intended to address the ongoing challenge of educational underachievement, and while not the focus of this paper, we recognise that improving achievement and 'teacher effectiveness' is very much part of a neoliberal agenda. We finish by offering a few thoughts by way of a conclusion to our analysis. The first is that despite the dominance of 'knowledge rich' as a recontextualising principle in the English curricula materials and in The New Zealand Curriculum I Te Mātaiaho, there is a danger that the term could be emptied out of the nuanced awareness of the interrelationship of concepts, content, and applied knowledge of the social realists (McPhail, 2025a & 2025b) and instead it could become synonymous with content, along the lines of E. D Hirsch's concept of knowledge-rich (Moss, 2025). This could be happen as other learning area curricula are developed if the writers do not have sufficient knowledge of the ideas that underpin the term. It could also happen if teachers feel alienated by the new direction of the curriculum. Teachers are experiencing an enormous amount of change at present, with announcements about New Zealand's national qualification, literacy and numeracy expectations, alongside substantial and frequent changes to the curriculum itself with very little consultation. Consequently, some teachers may be predisposed to view a

'knowledge-rich' curriculum as content-driven, and a threat to their autonomy (Gerritsen 2025a & 2025b February & April).

In the broader 'arena of struggle', subject English is an important site of contestation because of this subject's place at the intersection between literacy, identity, creativity, and culture, matters of great practical and symbolic importance. As we suggested earlier, the English curriculum wars have significance beyond the curriculum and beyond education. Our analysis of the subject-English curricula and The New Zealand Curriculum I Te Mātaiaho revealed an absence of any recontextualising principles derived from a bicultural or Tiriti-informed identity discourse. While space does not allow for a full discussion of what this might mean, evidence suggests that the curriculum wars are a manifestation of New Zealand's current political struggle in the search for a national identity that is collective rather than fractured.

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