Internationally, contemporary curriculum developments have foregrounded a range of competencies and/or capabilities, associated with learning to be developed ‘across’ the whole curriculum, spanning discipline or subject based boundaries. Typically, competencies and capabilities have been identified with intentions to advance agendas of lifelong learning and citizenship and/or to provide a focus via which to extend equity in education. This intent and the contemporary importance attached to competencies and/or capabilities is reflected in their articulation in the opening pages of official curriculum texts. Amidst interpretation and implementation of ‘the whole curriculum’ there is, however, little assurance that learning accorded status in the ‘front end’ of official texts will come to the fore in practice.

This paper reports on research that is critically examining these issues in the context of recent and ongoing curriculum developments in New Zealand and Australia. The first part of the paper presents documentary analysis of official curriculum texts and support materials associated with Key Competencies (KCs) in the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and General Capabilities (GCs) in the Australian Curriculum. Discussion focuses on the official intent with regard to the expression of KCs/GCs in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, specifically amidst the development and implementation of parallel curriculum requirements relating to (largely conventional) learning areas. The second part of the paper reports findings from collaborative school-based research undertaken in New Zealand that has explored the development of the KCs in the context of two curriculum areas, Health and Physical Education (HPE) and Science.

Drawing on contemporary education policy and curriculum theory, discussion examines tensions and synergies between the NZC’s ‘front end’ intentions and enactment of curriculum requirements specific to the learning areas amidst conventional curriculum structures. HPE and Science are identified with significant potential for KCs to be creatively embedded in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, such that a synergetic relationship can be achieved between ‘key competency learning’ and ‘learning area’ learning. Attention is drawn to the support needed to develop key competency learning and to critically engage with established knowledge boundaries and hierarchies in teaching and learning. The research provides important insights for curriculum authorities, teachers and teacher educators internationally who share a concern that ‘front end’ curriculum intentions remain evident and influential in teaching and learning in schools.