Do you AC what I see?

Annie Facchinetti

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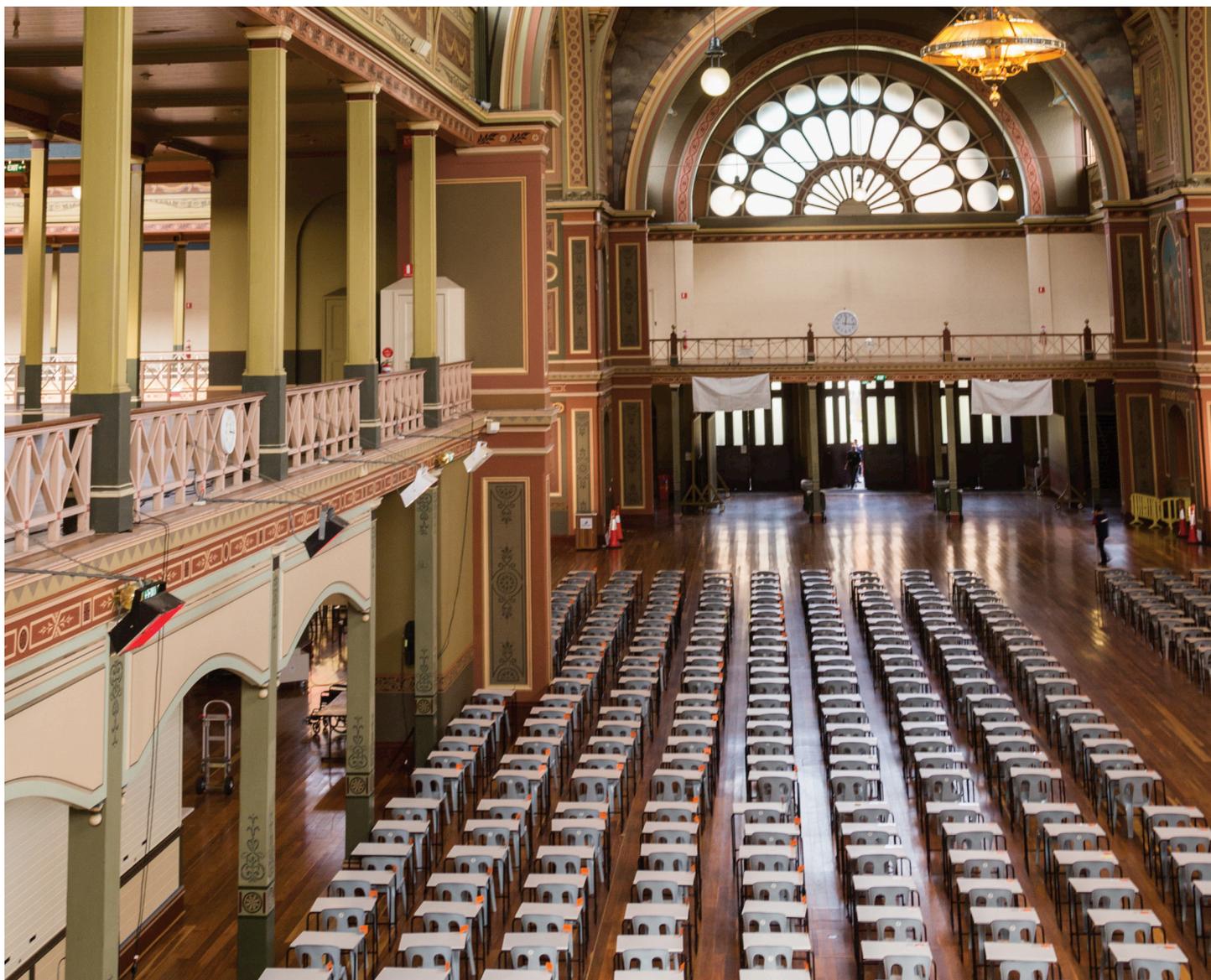
A long, long time ago, in some offices far, far away, a group of Ministers had a dream – a dream for a unified national curriculum. A dream that seemed like it might actually come to fruition if only the needs of parents, teachers, education systems, political influences, interest groups and market forces could be seamlessly integrated into a cohesive framework with the betterment of our students at its heart. Yet now, as we upgrade from Australian Curriculum Version 7.5 to Version 8.3, it has become evident that a unified national education agenda is still more dream than reality.

Faced with the prodigious task of reconciling pedagogical and indeed human imperatives with those of often competing political and national interests, the architects of the Australian Curriculum (AC) produced a document that should theoretically have brought consistency of learning entitlement for all students across the country (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014; Briant, Doherty, 2012). Many educators would, however, be unaware of the range of forces that were, and still are, being brought to bear on the AC, that has ultimately led to questions about its effectiveness (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014; Ditchburn,2012; Rahman, 2013; Torii, O'Connell, 2017).

Globalisation, neo-liberal and political influences

The terms 'child-centred' and 'student-focused' are buzzwords that will be familiar to anyone involved in education. It is therefore particularly interesting to note the influences on the AC that do not come from this perspective. The concept of using schooling as a tool to promote national interests is not a new one; Alvin Toffler in his 1970 best-selling book *Future Shock* suggested that, *"Mass education was the ingenious machine constructed by industrialism to produce the kind of adults it needed"* (p. 204), while Shaull (2000) went a step further offering two possible directions:

"There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (2000, p. 34).

Although the Australian Curriculum, with its roots in *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals* (Curriculum Corporation, 2008), which aspires to nurture "confident and creative individuals", might appear to align with the latter of Shaull's options, the reality is that it was subject to market forces right from the start. The *Curriculum Design Paper* that guided the AC's development, for example, commodifies education in the 'return on investment' language it uses, stating that "Providing high quality education is valuable to the community at large, and justifies people's investments of time, effort and resources" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013a). This is consistent with the commandeering of curriculum as a means to promote national economic interests and social order described by many academics (Ditchburn, 2012; Eisner, 1985; Gleeson, 2015; Spring, 2008), and is indicative of what Lindgard (2010, p. 132) says is an attempt to nationalise schooling.

Other evidence of globalisation and neo-liberalism can be seen in the choice of content of the curriculum. Based on *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals* (Curriculum Corporation, 2008) the AC seeks to develop young Australians who are "successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens" (p. 8). The three cross-curriculum priorities [CCPs] – Sustainability, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures – were conceived in response to these ideals and reflect the global and economic interests of the government and indeed the curriculum developers at the time (ACARA, n.d.; Torii, O'Connell, 2017). The Review of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014) criticises the CCPs as being politically motivated and poorly executed, and expresses concern that they are subject to the whims of changing governments. Their failure to reap potential benefits, such as greater inclusivity for Indigenous students that Rahman (2013, p. 669) has suggested can come from embedding cultural perspectives across the curriculum, is a testimony to the lack of consideration accorded to how the CCPs would work in a practical sense (ACARA, n.d; Salter, Maxwell, 2015).

While ACARA took a consultative approach to developing the curriculum that gave key stakeholders such as peak bodies and schools the opportunity for input (ACARA, 2013b), neo-liberal forces continue to be exerted on the AC as it evolves over time (Briant, Doherty, 2012; Luke, 2010). Eisner (1985) cautions against placing too much faith in schools as 'educational churches' with 'economy and efficiency' as our gods (p. 97), yet the recent Australian Curriculum review dedicates a whole section to the opinions of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. Observations from an OECD perspective, cited in the review in reference to effective schools on the global stage, as measured by standardised testing, include a strong emphasis on core curriculum and the use of inspectorates or other agencies to monitor and hold schools accountable for performance (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014, p. 33–34). Ball (2003) argues that this kind of interference is changing the very nature not only of teaching, but of teachers themselves, forcing them to ditch innovation to focus on delivering outcomes – a battle for the teacher's soul.

The Review of the Australian Curriculum was clearly motivated by political, rather than educational imperatives as well, as can be seen from the backgrounds of the chosen reviewers. Kevin Donnelly has Liberal Party affiliations and is a self-avowed education conservative (Snyder, 2008. p. 3); Ken Wiltshire was engaged by the Queensland Labor Government to evaluate their state curriculum, but has also publically expressed similar views that advocate a 'back to basics' ethos, in preference to more progressive pedagogy (Snyder, 2008, p. 1). It was foreseeable, then, that the Review's recommendations resulted in changes to the AC that reflect the more traditional worldview espoused by the Abbott Government. For example, the review advocated giving greater emphasis on a Western view of history and culture (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014, p. 246) that has resulted in the addition of a specifically British perspective on government and democracy in Year 9 History (ACARA, 2015).
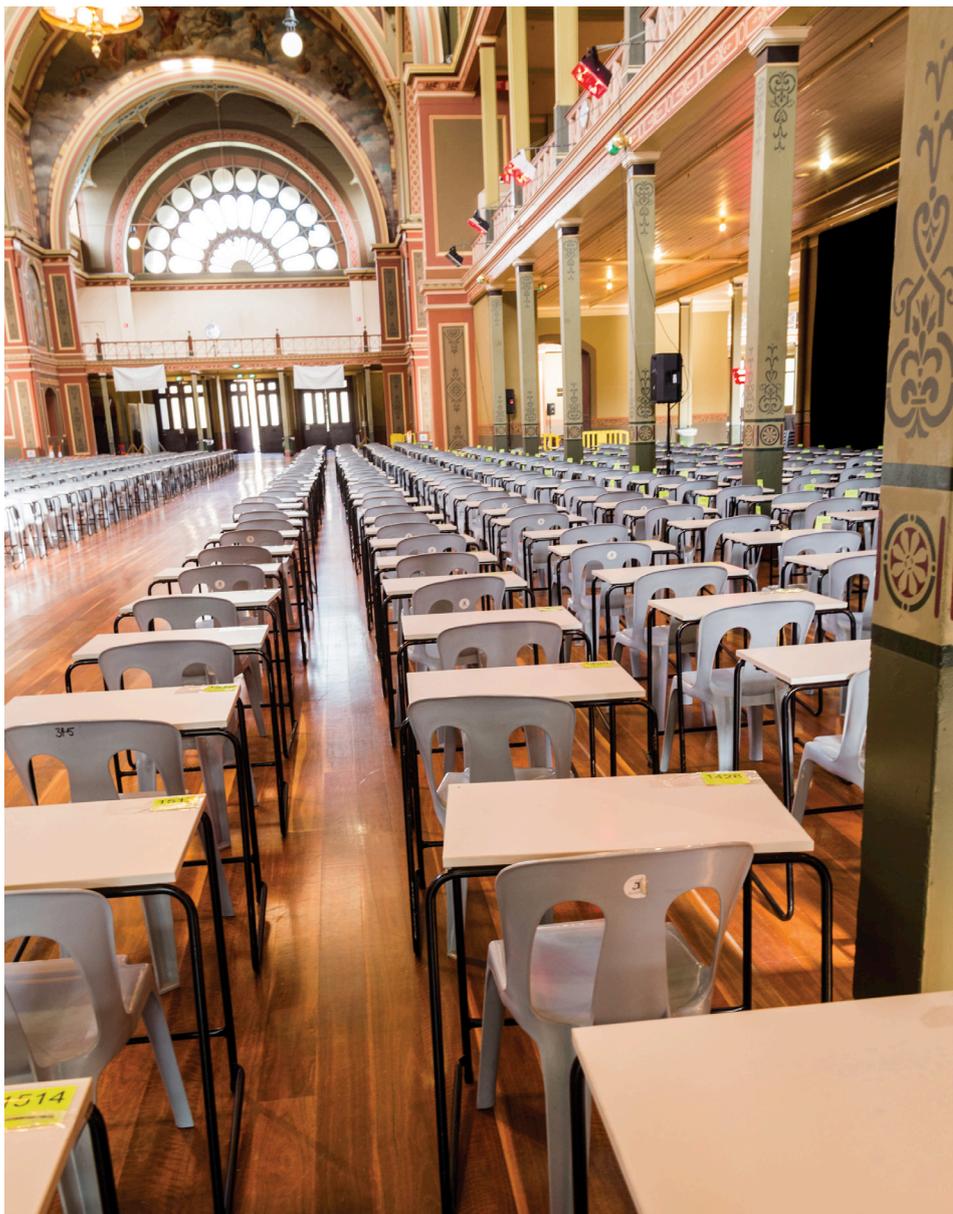
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Pedagogy

In many ways, the AC appears to undermine the professionalism of teachers by treating them as implementers of curriculum, rather than active participants in the process of education. Ditchburn (2012) asserts that this is, "a case of all responsibility, but no power" (p. 355), suggesting that the supporting documentation for the AC implies that it will be a "teacher-friendly curriculum where all the tricky aspects of curriculum development have been considered" (p. 354) with the clear connotation that teachers are not capable of doing this for themselves. This view is in stark contrast with the current push on the ground in schools for teachers to engage in action research to personalise learning for students (Carter, 2016; Timperley, 2011). For

instance, Catholic Education Melbourne (2015) is currently exploring the concept of teachers as designers and students as active partners in the journey. There is therefore clearly tension between teachers being accorded respect for their understanding of and ability to successfully direct the learning process and the pressures brought to bear by the requirements, explicit and implicit, of the AC (Ball, 2003; Briant, Doherty, 2012; Ditchburn, 2012).

The organisation of the curriculum content into year levels rather than bands suggests a tendency towards a deficit view of education, which designates what students 'should' know at a particular point in time, rather than taking a developmental perspective which allows students to access learning at their point of

need (Griffin, Murray, Care, Thomas, Perri, 2010; Harry, Klingner, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Although the supporting documentation for the AC states that, *"Teachers use the Australian Curriculum achievement standards and content to identify current levels of learning and achievement, and then to select the most appropriate content (possibly from across several year levels) to teach individual students and/or groups of students"* (ACARA, n.d), most teachers are unlikely to read the *Implications for teaching assessing and reporting* in any detail. Instead, the structure of the curriculum lends itself to a 'checklist' mentality (Ditchburn, 2012, p. 353) whereby teachers feel obliged to 'tick off' the content requirements for their year level, regardless of the entry points of students.

Performativity

Neo-liberal influences on education are also exerted through international testing regimes such as the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment [PISA] and in Australia the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] (Spring, 2008; Thompson, 2013). According to Ball (2003) the growing emphasis on standardised testing is damaging to teachers' sense of autonomy and efficacy. The introduction of the *My School* website in 2010, which reports NAPLAN results and allows public comparison of school achievement, has spawned media and political calls not to change the curriculum, but to improve teacher quality (Henebery, 2015; Thompson, 2013). Yet *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* document (ACARA, 2013b) pointedly avoids suggesting what quality teaching might entail, instead stating that, "Schools are able to decide how best to deliver the curriculum, drawing on integrated approaches where appropriate and using pedagogical approaches that account for students' needs, interests and the school and community context" (p. 13). Without explicit pedagogical guidance from the AC, the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985, p. 98) for many schools becomes preparation for test taking rather than for life.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the obsession to measure has not translated into an increase in employability for students. With youth unemployment sitting at 13.5%, well above the average of 5.9% (Patty, 2017), the Business Council of Australia (2016) has identified business literacy, critical analysis and problem solving amongst the skills that employers most covet. Yet according to Torii and O'Connell (2017), our education system has not kept up with the changing demands of the world, and does not cultivate the capabilities that students will need to succeed beyond school, a situation that is unlikely to change, given that the AC review explicitly cautions against favouring an inquiry based approach to learning at the expense of more conservative teaching methodology (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014, p. 5).

Inclusivity

Although the *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) appears to apply to all students, the reviewers of the Australian Curriculum noted that it is 'manifestly deficient' in meeting the needs of students with disability (p. 5). While the new Victorian Curriculum (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016) has introduced levels that cater specifically to students with disability, allowing teachers to identify appropriate learning pathways and assessments, the AC has not yet followed suit. The Curriculum Review (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014) also noted that special education teachers felt they were left out of consultation on the development of the AC (p. 102).

The same concerns can be raised in relation to minority groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rahman (2013) speaks of the hidden curriculum, whereby the social and academic norms in schools privilege white students and prevent Indigenous students from accessing the curriculum in a way they can relate to. Rahman advocates considering how indigenous students can become "bi-cultural learners who are competent and knowledgeable in both mainstream culture and their home culture" (p. 661), an ideal that could equally be applied to other cultural minority groups in Australia.

Inclusivity is a global trend in education (Di Rocco, 2012; Mariga, McConkey, Myezwa, 2014) and the Australian Curriculum appears to have some way to go to meet its goal of promoting equity and excellence for all young Australians (ACARA, 2013b, p. 5).

Conclusion

Although the Australian Curriculum has attempted to bring together disparate views and ideals in a single document, as the reviewers of the AC observed, *"No curriculum is ever value free and curriculum designers, whether they are aware of it or not, are building on or privileging a particular belief or philosophy about the nature and purpose of education"* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014, p. 12). Take a look at the Australian Curriculum website, and you will find a page dedicated to implementation guidelines in each jurisdiction across the country (ACARA, n.d.). It tells an interesting story of politics and priorities. While some areas, such as Queensland, Northern Territory and the ACT seem to be adopting the AC as it is presented, other states, including NSW and Victoria have launched their own versions that emphasise different beliefs and standards, such as favouring coding. So ultimately, we still do not have a national curriculum. In many ways, the 'what' of curriculum is becoming irrelevant; students have easy access to information like never before. But if our education ministers and leaders can't agree on the curriculum content, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to move away from out-dated

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approaches to teaching and learning in a systemic way. And if we can't successfully renegotiate what education looks like in the 21st century, then it is the dreams of our students, not of our Education Ministers, that are at stake.

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