

A formula for success?

Australia's new curriculum

Annie Facchinetti on the long awaited change

When the wind is in the east, 'tis neither good for man nor beast

This autumn has been Australia's coldest since at least 1950. March was the wettest on record, with monthly rainfall records broken at a number of locations, including Whyalla in South Australia and Bombala in New South Wales. And in the last 60 years, temperatures have risen by an average of 1° C across the country. But our climate isn't the only thing that is changing. In education, the change that is looming large is the implementation of the new Australian Curriculum.

It has taken a long time for a national curriculum to finally make it from political agenda to practical reality. As early as 1991, the Australian Education Council (the precursor to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, with the handy acronym MCEEDYA) suggested eight key learning areas that should be included in a national curriculum, but its subsequent rejection of a proposed national curriculum framework in 1993 effectively torpedoed Paul Keating's efforts to unify the educational direction of the states and territories. John Howard's government

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made another attempt to introduce a national curriculum in 2007, focusing largely on history and Australian values. This was thwarted when the Rudd government was elected.

At last, however, the winds of change seem to be blowing with full force. In December 2010, members of MCEEDYA representing all states and territories agreed to 'substantially implement' the four subjects in Phase I of the Australian Curriculum – English, Mathematics, History and Science – by 2013. This historic moment represents the greatest progress so far in establishing a curriculum that outlines the minimum skills and knowledge that our children are entitled to acquire at each stage of their schooling from the foundation year (the common name given to the first year of schooling in Australian Curriculum documents) to Year 10. With a lot of the hard work in designing and writing the curriculum complete, responsibility for whether or not the Australian Curriculum

succeeds is now being turned over to schools.

There has been unprecedented consultation in the development of the Australian Curriculum, and theoretically this should ease the pain of implementation somewhat. Still, there is bound to be anxiety and a healthy dash of cynicism when it comes to letting go of the familiar and embracing the new. Victorian teachers in particular can still well remember the difficulties they faced when the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) were brought in, with many feeling unsupported and uninformed about the expectations and interpretations of the documents. What follows are some of the key concerns about the Australian Curriculum (AC) identified by teachers and principals and an exploration of how much we really have to fear from the changes.

Chris Ray is the principal of Our Lady Help of Christians Primary School in Melbourne's outer suburbs. In general, he is optimistic about the proposed curriculum, and feels that teachers are in a better position than when new releases have happened in the past. "At a system level – i.e. Catholic Education in Victoria – key staff have been involved in the development of the AC and in

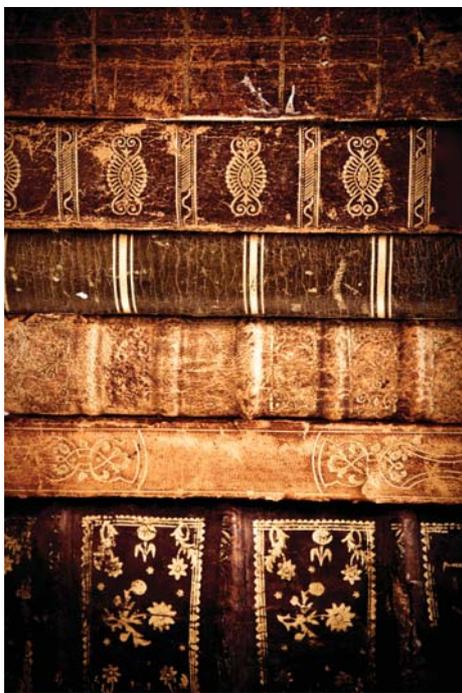
presenting components to other sectors. There is a sense that 'we' are an integral part of the process and won't be merely tagging along with the government sector." It is easy to take the collaborative approach across government, Catholic and independent sectors for granted, but it has been an important part of ensuring a common understanding and direction for all schools.

This does not, however, mean that there are no areas of concern. An obvious one is how the curriculum will work with composite or multi-age classes. Many jurisdictions in Australia currently have learning standards that are assessed over a two-year period which typically aligns to the more common composite arrangements. (e.g. In Victoria, Level 2 of the VELS covers Years 1 and 2, and is therefore easy to implement and assess in a 1/2 composite class.) The AC introduces content descriptors and achievement standards for each year level. For subjects such as English and Mathematics where learning can be more easily viewed on a continuum, this does not pose so much of a problem. The difficulty lies more with content-based subjects such as history where, for example, Year 3 is focused on 'Community and Remembrance' and Year 4 is focused on 'First Contacts.' How can both content areas be effectively covered without having to teach two separate lessons each time history is scheduled?

David Howes is the General Manager, Curriculum at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). According to Howes, the new structure shouldn't pose significant problems for classes with more than one year level in them. "Teachers can continue to teach the same content to the whole class in multi-age classes. The achievement standards will focus on skills and concept development, so teachers can deal with the same content at differing levels of complexity." Returning to the History example above, this approach would allow an entire Year 3/4 class to study 'Community and Remembrance' one year, and 'First Contacts' the next. The Year 3s in the second half of the cycle would then look at 'Community Remembrance' the following year (in Year 4), thus ensuring the content requirements were covered at some point during their primary school journey.

To make sure that both the content descriptors and the achievement standards are appropriate and workable, the VCAA recently undertook a trial and validation project. Participating schools were asked to provide feedback on how the curriculum worked for their students, giving teachers the opportunity to identify any areas of the achievement standards that might pose difficulties if the content for a particular year level was not strictly followed. It is anticipated that information gathered from this initiative will be used to further refine the achievement standards to ensure that they are, as Howes suggests, focused on skills and concepts, rather than tied to content.

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The Australian Curriculum content itself was inevitably going to be a source of concern for stakeholders at both primary and secondary level, and to some degree, pleasing all the people all the time was never going to happen. In the primary sector, the sheer volume of what was included in the initial drafts started a storm of protest. Since then, ongoing consultation has resulted in a paring down of the original documents and David Howes asserts that, "The content has been reduced to make it manageable." Principal Chris Ray, on the other hand, acknowledges that: "There are concerns about the volume of content when all subject areas are brought online and how we will cover all of this." For primary schools, the challenge lies in how to allow students to follow paths of inquiry that genuinely meet their needs and interests, while ensuring that the required content in history and science, and in Phase II, geography and the arts, is incorporated into an already very full teaching program.

The issue of the volume of content at both primary and secondary level was also identified by Dennis Sleight, Principal of St Anne's Central School in Temora, New South Wales. Of the initial flurry of arguments about what should and should not be included in the AC, Sleight says, "All we could appreciate was that the course would mean more preparation for those of us teaching it and no indication that anyone had really listened to our plea for some genuine pruning of content."

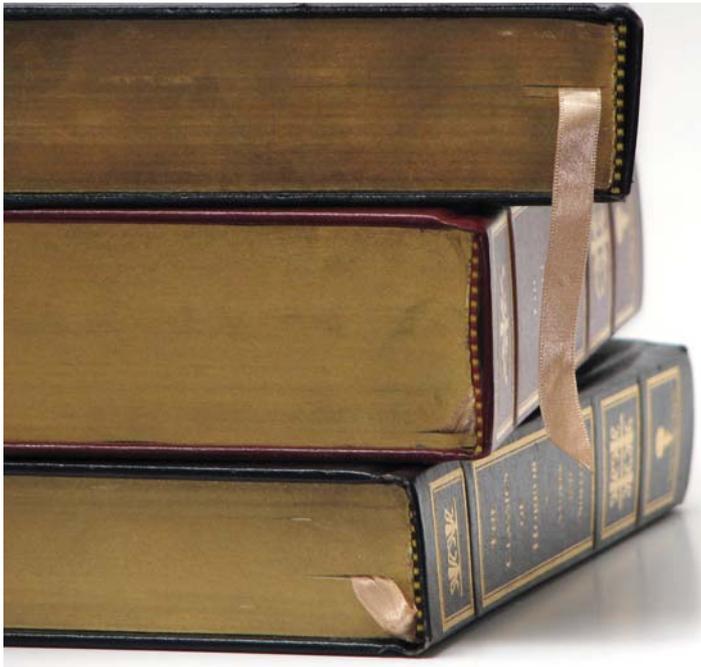
Teachers in New South Wales might well find themselves inundated with content more than

anywhere else. The climate change sceptics in the piece, the New South Wales Board of Studies, declares on its website that it is "developing new syllabus documents for English, mathematics, science and history for NSW schools, using the Australian Curriculum as a key component." A quick analysis of the draft mathematics syllabus for Early Stage 1 (equivalent to the Australian Curriculum Foundation Year) reveals that the document incorporates the AC Foundation Year content descriptors, but also includes additional content taken from the existing NSW Syllabus Foundation Statements such as multiplication and division, and even draws on Year 1 of the Australian Curriculum for content in the area of Chance. This will certainly give breadth to the NSW curriculum, but possibly at the expense of the depth that developers of the AC have worked so hard to achieve.

In many ways, the decision to deviate from the negotiated curriculum represents a wasted opportunity. According to Dennis Sleight, "Those of us who had previously been a bit worried about whether we really understood the old curriculum saw this as a chance to get in on the ground floor and master the new one." He goes on to explain how the initial enthusiasm of his staff turned to annoyance and then apathy. "...Just when we were starting to get into our stride, we heard rumblings that our State Government was planning to secede from the national initiative, apparently thinking that no-one could possibly do the job as well as NSW did, and therefore there was no point in diluting the brilliance of our already magnificent documents. We were somewhat bemused by this approach as none of us really shared this bureaucratic admiration for the materials we were using."

Victoria has taken quite a different approach with the soon-to-be-released AusVELS. While the VCAA is working to present the Australian Curriculum in the VELS structure, the content of the four subject areas included in Phase I will remain intact. In a recent article entitled *Transition to the Australian Curriculum in Victoria*, David Howes explains that working from two different curriculum documents would not be practical for teachers. AusVELS will therefore be a 'hybrid' that bridges the gap between the old and the new. It will also allow Victorian teachers to keep the explicit focus on personal and social learning, and interdisciplinary learning, areas which are highly valued as domains in their own right in the VELS, but are embedded in the General Capabilities of the AC. As consultation on the General Capabilities is still underway, and publication of revisions not due until November 2011, AusVELS will support Victorian teachers to work towards implementing the first four learning areas of the Australian Curriculum without losing out in these areas.

With the strong emphasis on accountability brought about by the publication of NAPLAN results on the *My School* website, the period of



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transition from state and territory curricula to the Australian Curriculum poses a particularly interesting conundrum for national testing. According to David Howes, “Over time, NAPLAN criteria will be aligned to the Australian Curriculum.” For states such as Queensland, where the Queensland Studies Authority suggests that from next year, “...schools will plan, teach, assess and report English, Mathematics and Science across the year levels using the Australian Curriculum,” national testing may not yet reflect what is being taught.

The broader issue of assessment and reporting has yet to be finalised in the Australian Curriculum. Victorian teachers, especially those in the Catholic system, will remember well the suddenness and lack of flexibility with which VELS reporting was introduced, and it seems that lessons have been well learned from this experience. David Howes affirms that: “There will be no required changes to reporting requirements in 2011 or 2012. This provides for an extended period of consultation in relation to any possible changes to reporting.” It is certainly reassuring to know that the robust consultation that has taken place at all stages of the development of the AC will extend beyond the core content and achievement standards.

If it succeeds, the establishment of a national curriculum has many potential advantages for our education system. Victorian Principal Chris Ray asserts that: “At a national level there is much to be gained from having a degree of uniformity across all schools in the country. While each state is likely to work with the AC in slightly different ways, for the first time ever all teachers in Australia will have a shared language and general understanding of the curriculum framework. This will be of benefit to teachers who move across states to work and to children who move between states.”

Its implementation is not, however, a foregone conclusion. As recently as January 2011, *The Age* newspaper reported that the Coalition would be prepared to start the process all over again if it wins government in the future. The direction NSW, as the most populous state in the country, has taken, also undermines the extent of the change. As Dennis Sleight puts it, “Politicians in NSW have won the day and lost the battle.” The Rudd and Gillard governments have certainly managed to push the agenda of a national curriculum further than any other government. What remains to be seen is if it can weather the storm of opposition to at last bring some commonality to our unnecessarily fragmented education system in a way that does not compromise the high standards that our students deserve.

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