

The Australian Curriculum – a Grand Design... or is it?

John Muskovits questions the thinking behind the National Curriculum



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Kevin McCloud the presenter from the TV Series *Grand Designs* has a crusade “for architecture and designs that honours and responds to the people who use them”.¹ After so many false dawns, the Australian Curriculum heralded high expectations of a world-class curriculum that would indeed honour and respond to the people who use it: our students. Here was an opportunity to move beyond the polemics and political expediency to collaboratively design the very best that our nation has to offer in our understanding of what best practice means. And have we?

The Australian Curriculum has its foundations in the 2008 MCEETYA Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians which spoke of a commitment “to supporting all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens

and to promoting equity and excellence in education.”² Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the body charged with implementing the Australian Curriculum on its website (<http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum.html>) went onto to say that this curriculum will “equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century.”³ Arguably, there is a strong resonance by many in the educational community for the sentiments expressed by ACARA these statements are seen as a good architectural foundation on which to build a world-class curriculum.

While in principle the Australian Curriculum is a positive step forward, regrettably, there has not been a broader and deeper conversation about the real and sustainable pedagogical

advantages of a national curriculum and what it is about Australia in the 21st century that we need a national curriculum. Some of the reasons given by ACARA for moving to an Australian curriculum such as student mobility and resourcing are really second order in nature.

A holistic design

On face value, the Australian Curriculum’s framework of eight “Key Learning Areas”, 10 “General Capabilities” and three “Cross Curricula Dimensions” moving from regional to national to global perspectives are easy to conceptualise. However, a much more holistic implementation of curriculum design is required. We should not be grappling with Phase Two issues such as: Do we want all students to learn one language? and which one should be targeted? during the final consultation stage of Phase One.

The process of implementing four subjects in Phase One and not knowing what Phase Three will look like is inherently flawed. There is a need to have an understanding and an explanation of what the Australian Curriculum looks like from the very beginning of the implementation process. This lack of overall coherence reflects a poor understanding of holistic curriculum design. How can we discuss the merits of the four subjects in Phase One if we don't know about what other subjects will be included? The parts of the curriculum do not make sense without the whole.

There should also be more than just the mapping of content across jurisdictions to determine overlap and areas of divergence. How do state and territory curriculums, with different conceptual designs, connect with this mapping process? These conceptual differences need to be mapped and clearly articulated in the online feedback to the profession.

Special education

The recent *ACT Review of Special Education* suggested that what is needed for the five to seven per cent of students with a disability is “a rising tide that lifts all boats”.⁴ While the Australian Curriculum is to be congratulated for its aspiration of wanting all young Australians to be “successful learners”,⁵ “confident individuals”

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and “informed citizens”, sadly, it falls well short in terms of the detail on the design and implementation dimensions in this aspect.

There needs to be a better response to student diversity. One way to help address this is to decouple the years and levels, especially for assessment and reporting and thereby develop a more personalised curriculum. (Read *Breakthrough*, Michael Fullan, Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola Corwin Press, 2006). This will mean setting different expectations for different groups – still with high expectations for each group but in a personalised context.

ACARA should have the primary responsibility for providing a framework for school systems and teachers for those students who do not fit into the current normative approach of the curriculum. This challenge echoes the Good Samaritan and Benedictine educational values of the school where I work, which calls for respect for individual differences so that “the strong have something to strive for and the weak nothing to run from.”⁶ The NSW Board of Studies feedback echoes my concerns that there is “no apparent content or approach

to the content to address the learning needs of students with disabilities.”⁷ How difficult is it to live in a home that has been poorly designed? It seems in the development of the Australian Curriculum the students, those whom we are called to honour and respond to, are invisible. Where was the extensive consultation with students? Where are the voices of students with a disability and their advocates in these documents?

Wide and deep

Daniel Pink in his book *A Whole New Mind* asserts that we are entering the “Conceptual Age”.⁸ The challenge in this age is not about more complex content but about deepening the quality of analysis, often with less content. Less is more. Similarly, McWilliams argues that the coverage of more and more content in the conceptual age will not improve student performance.⁹ What is needed is to develop a curriculum that is “wide and deep” and has “shades of grey”.

One of the biggest inhibitors for teacher effectiveness is the overcrowding of the curriculum. Breadth should not come at the expense of depth. This obsession with product at the expense of process is supported by the NSW response to the draft K-10 Australian Curriculum which recommends¹⁰ “a substantial reduction in the amount of content expected

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for each unit of time indicated to writers.” What are needed are high quality documents with low definition for a local perspective. There needs to be a balance of informed prescription and informed professionalism. There is a danger that increased standardisation and overcrowding of the Australian Curriculum will lead to a decrease in innovation and creativity. Brian Croke, who is a member of the Board of the ACARA, in a recent newspaper article also expressed his concerns by saying “It would be an irony, and a pity, if creativity turned out to be a casualty of [the] national curriculum and assessment.”¹¹

At a recent conference I attended,¹² Edward De Bono asked the 1800 or so gathered, to list the three main problems facing the world today. He gave us three minutes and then took our responses. The usual issues were raised: global warming, poverty, AIDS etc. As he wrote them down he paused, looked up at the gathering and poignantly asked “did anyone have poor thinking?”

A subject called *Thinking in Schools* should be designed and implemented in the Australian Curriculum. Research by the De Bono Institute in Melbourne (<http://www.debono.org/main.html>) has, according to De Bono, indicated that school performance is enhanced significantly by such a subject. This specific course could include:

- i) Perception (CORT strategies) (Read *Thinking strategies: frameworks for thinking*¹³)
- ii) Six hats and
- iii) Parallel thinking.

Testing attainment

It can be argued the current diagnostic tests such as NAPLAN do not show up a student’s performance in creativity or higher order reasoning. This is what we should be also

The over emphasis on testing has its flaws

designing, teaching and measuring in our schools. The inclusion of “Cross Disciplinary Understandings” is warranted. However, there should be more of a focus in this area with the development of cross-referencing to other parts of the curriculum. The nature of encouraging students to think across disciplines in an integrated manner is essential for the improvement in student performances especially in the middle years (10–15 years) of schooling.

Therefore more overt relationships need to be developed between middle schooling (Read *The Success of Middle Years Initiatives: Some important considerations* by Donna Pendergast) and the Australian Curriculum. The Melbourne Declaration of Schooling states “students in the middle years are the greatest risk of disengagement from learning.”¹⁴ While aspects of the general capabilities offer support, there is not a clear alignment between the K-12 Australian Curriculum and middle schooling. Evidence from the *Queensland Longitudinal Study* (2001), *Beyond the Middle Years Report* (2002) and the *Sustaining Middle Years Reform* (2005) indicate that intentional middle schooling makes a difference in the learning outcomes of students, especially around the Year 8 level.

If this is the case, then the Australian Curriculum should develop an intentional approach with:

- i) A clear philosophy on middle schooling
- ii) A comprehensive range of significant practices for middle schooling aligned across the nation.

While the concept of general capabilities is important in the Australian Curriculum, much more needs to be developed in the content and sequencing of these capabilities. How will these capabilities look in the content and the achievement standards? Will they be assessed? Will they be treated equally? Again, these types of questions should have been addressed before the writing began for the Australian Curriculum.

At the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) Conference this year it was suggested that within any classroom, five years of schooling separate the top and bottom of a class in terms of academic performance. The Australian Curriculum and in particular the “Achievement Standards” do not effectively come to terms with this research. These standards are more like descriptions and a summary of the content than criteria that can be measured at any given point of the learning continuum as in NSW. I cannot see what teachers will effectively do with these achievement standards at present.

The over emphasis on testing has its flaws, which are well reflected internationally. Dr Ken Boston in a recent article in the *Sunday Times* said national testing in the UK has failed.¹⁵ The UK Cambridge Primary Schools Group said national testing does not support student performance.¹⁶ The work of Claxton¹⁷ suggests that you do not need external exams to attain rigour and reliability. What is needed is to invest more heavily in the role of formative assessment, as in Finland, to improve student performance. This takes time, money, vision and coordination. It is interesting that Finland is one of the highest performers in the OECD PISA tests and has neither a national curriculum nor a *My School* website. It can be argued that education today is being strangled by standardised testing rather than being transformed. You can’t fatten a cow by weighing it!

Prof Caldwell of the University of Melbourne at the recent QSA Conference argued that we need to prepare pre-service teachers to better assess and analyse data and know how to deal with students who fall behind, much like our Finnish colleagues. There needs to be a proactive approach between curriculum design and pre-service teacher development.¹⁸

The effective domain

Organisations such as the Coalition for Children’s Mental Health¹⁹ advocate for more proactive measures in the area of mental health. Within this context “Values Education” is not only a moral imperative but also a pedagogical imperative in our schools today. This “Curriculum of Giving” as Nielsen²⁰ describes it is fundamental that it sit underneath the Australian Curriculum. The work of Seligmen²¹ reminds us that meaningful happiness is fundamental for young people. One of the best ways for this to occur is through “Service Learning”, which becomes transformative when

it involves giving to others. Service learning has a positive effect on students' performance. This is reflected in the meta-analysis of Lovat, *et al.*²² (2009). Where is this woven through in the design of the Australian Curriculum?

The work of Zohar and Marshall²³ (2002) confirms the concept of "Spiritual Intelligence". If this is the case, and it is an important component in a child's education, then it is equally important that spirituality is represented in the Australian Curriculum. Currently while implicit in the "General Capabilities", spirituality needs to have a far greater prominence. There also needs to be more overt connections to "Emotional Intelligence". While this is reflected again to some degree in the "General Capabilities" there needs to be more of an emphasis in what Robinson²⁴ and Kessler²⁵ call a multi-conceptual intelligence. This is supported by the organisations such as the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations²⁶ reflecting on the work of Goldman who indicate that IQ accounts for between 4–10 per cent for career success. 90 per cent of what success you attain once you are in that career is geared towards emotional intelligence. How would our Australian Curriculum look if we adopted this multi-conceptual intelligence approach to schooling?

We need to develop hybrid spaces as McWilliams,²⁷ at the QSA Conference, calls them to accommodate the way students learn in the 21st century incorporating a café pedagogy of "just in time", "just enough" and "down the hall" where students choose when and how to engage in learning in the "Conceptual Age". Architecture in schools need to reflect this move away from only "Training, Sorting and Credentialing" to "Self Selected Learning", "Self Management" and a developing a disposition to learning which is reminiscent of the coffee houses of the 18th and 19th century. The Australian Curriculum, systems and jurisdictions must be cognisant of this paradigm shift.

Funding the National Curriculum

The source of funding for introducing a national curriculum, including professional learning needs further conversation. If ACARA is serious about delivering a world-class curriculum, it needs a significant investment of resources. In principle there is a need for intelligent accountability yet it remains to be seen if ACARA can deliver on this in terms of the funding of professional learning opportunities. Systems and jurisdictions cannot be expected to carry this all.

Frank Crowther²⁷ called on all in conferences to "Slow down the change in order to speed up the improvement and to be selective about what to implement." Building capacity and then being able to sustain it is important in any reform. It takes time. If we are to develop effective and long-term change in curriculum we need to

develop teacher leadership as well as principal leadership. To do this we need significant direction and resourcing from ACARA and the other systems and jurisdictions.

In this paper, it has been argued that to implement an Australian curriculum we need a design that is holistic, courageous, research based, and takes into account the voice of students to whom we are called to honour and respond. It was Lee Cunxin, author of *Mao's Last Dancer* who quoted the Sufi aphorism "Where the heart weeps for what it has lost the spirit laughs for what it has found." The focus is indeed in that spirit of what we can find together so we can deepen the conversation and develop "an academic environment at the forefront of modern development"²⁸ and one justifiably that could be called world class in name, practise and design.

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