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Will the Australian Curriculum Up the Intellectual Ante in Primary Classrooms?

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The evidence is now pretty clear. We seem to have figured out how to teach the ‘basics’ to just about everyone. ... But we are deeply unsuccessful at our 21st century agenda of moving beyond basic competencies to proficiencies.

Lauren B. Resnick – Wallace Foundation Distinguished Lecture (Educational Researcher, 2010).

What is surprising in the last two years of debate over an Australian national curriculum has been the failure to engage with research on the enacted curriculum: on what actually goes on in Australian classrooms. Important contributions to this edition of *Curriculum Perspectives* will focus on the specific inclusions and exclusions of the draft versions of the Australian Curriculum. My brief comments here set out to refocus attention on the shaping of classroom practice: on the potential impacts of the Australian Curriculum on everyday teaching and learning.

Specific content aside, any official curriculum – its developmental skill and knowledge taxonomies, textbooks and learning materials, standards and levels statements – comes to ground via an *enacted curriculum* of teaching and learning events ‘lived’ by students and teachers. Practically, the new national curriculum will trigger a set of institutional interventions (e.g., teacher education, national and state dissemination and implementation, professional development, monitoring and evaluation). These processes will set the resources and contexts for the face-to-face recontextualisation of the officially designated ‘stuff’ (i.e., knowledge, skill, capacity) into actual teaching and learning. The results could have significant material, institutional and educational consequences for learners, and, reflexively, for teachers, schools, communities and, if we are to take this curriculum on its word, the nation. They could, alternatively, confound an already difficult situation.

Specific knowledges and skills can only be ‘named’ in official curriculum documents at a level of technical abstraction. They are remade through the

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1 See Cohen and Hill (2001) on the importance of alignment of message systems, policy coherence and systemic support for teacher professionalism.
lenses and practices of teachers’ substantive world, field and disciplinary knowledge, then brought to life in classrooms in relation to teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and students’ cultural scripts and background schemata, which include a host of other available messages of media, institutions and community cultures. The enacted curriculum will be influenced by adjacent policies and practices on assessment, evaluation and credentialing (which define ‘what will count’) - and on school funding, governance and leadership; teacher training and professionalism, and so forth. In short, there is no direct ‘hypodermic’ effect between the official curriculum and the enacted curriculum.

Hence, my comments here will focus on current – and prospective – scenarios for an enacted curriculum in the general climate of ‘reform’ established by current Federal and State policies, school-level governance and accountability practices, and the affiliated media and community debate.

Curriculum in Search of the Problem

The national curriculum, now in its draft stages, remains a solution seeking a robust demonstration of an educational problem. Like all national, state and regional curriculum settlements: the debate to date has been a forum for contending claims about appropriate ideological and cultural content. These range from divided views on prescribed literary content, the place of new media versus a continued concentration on print, to an ongoing debate over which version of Australian history will be made to count, and so on. A settlement on the “selective traditions” of school knowledge (Apple, 1978) – popular and disciplinary, conservative and radical, canonical content and psychologically-defined ‘behaviours’ and ‘skills’ – necessarily entails trade-offs and compromises from all parties. This social and political process of reaching a settlement can lead to official syllabus statements that are controversial and potentially unstable – as the recent Texas revisions to the social studies curriculum, Arizona bans on ‘ethnic studies’ indicate, lest we forget the MACOS-SEMP Queensland curriculum settlement in the 1980s.

It can also lead to an educationally unwieldy response based on perceived but empirically undemonstrated problems of current teaching and learning. There are two major risks here. First, that the settlement will attempt to incorporate all views on requisite skills and knowledges – leading to bloated or conceptually incoherent syllabi that, simply, cannot be taught. The enacted curriculum in schools is a zero-sum game: there is a finite amount of instructional prime time available at each grade and level. This prospect needs to be viewed in the context of widespread teacher complaint that the 1990s movement for “outcomes-based” curriculum led to curriculum reform by addition, agglomeration and collection. Second, and this is my focal concern here, is the risk that the settlement might be a reactive and ameliorative response to claims about current classroom practices that are not well substantiated. The media and political debate over curriculum content to date has featured stereotypes of the enacted curriculum based on anecdote, reminiscence and, interestingly, an over-reading of existing syllabus documents as representing the status-quo in
classrooms. To date, there has been no comprehensive survey of teachers’ uses of official materials.\(^2\)

So perhaps a return to square one is in order: to the core questions of the educational problems to be addressed by the development of a national curriculum.

To date, the national curriculum debate has turned on normative claims about NAPLAN year 3 and 5 test results on basic numeracy and literacy. The received wisdom is that there is a lack of sufficient emphasis on basic skills instruction in schools, this despite PISA data on the literacy achievement of 14 year olds that suggests that Australian students have consistently scored in the top quartile of countries in literacy and other areas (OECD, 2007). In terms of the overall capacities of secondary students – anecdotal claims by employers, parents and university lecturers about the quality of school graduates have been used to advance arguments that standards have deteriorated. While MCEETYA reports annual data on retention and completion rates, there is no population representative empirical data on the exit-level skills, knowledge and capacities of secondary school graduates. Nonetheless, the principled arguments for a national curriculum tabled are: (1) persistent patterns of educational inequality in test score achievement, retention and completion – with students’ from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous students’ achievement lagging behind that of their middle and upper socioeconomic background counterparts; and (2) reportedly inadequate levels of skill, competence and capacity of the ‘human capital’ leaving schools and entering the Australian tertiary training system and the workforce.

The patterns of Indigenous achievement in all categories are a national disgrace, an educational symptom of unresolved social and cultural, political and economic business. And, as demonstrated on regression analyses of the PISA data and some state testing data, the impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage on test score achievement are significant (Schleicher, in press/2010; McGaw, 2010) – though the ‘equity gap’ appears to be persisting in the US, UK and other countries, despite a decade of test-driven policies, published league tables, privitisation and marketisation of schools (Luke & Woods, 2008).

Where we might differ, then, is on the demonstration and analysis of the educational problems that the national curriculum – and its affiliated suite of policies in testing, publishing of results and accountability and (yet to be revealed) approach to funding – is attempting to address.

A decade of data from the US No Child Left Behind indicates that a mandated curriculum emphasis on direct instruction in basic skills can yield improved but limited early performance on standardized achievement tests in literacy and numeracy, as US psychologist Lauren Resnick’s (2010) comments in the

\(^2\) An ARC linkage project – jointly undertaken by Queensland University of Technology, the Queensland Studies Authority and the Queensland Teachers’ Union is currently undertaking large scale survey work on teachers’ selective use of official syllabus materials, standards statements, textbooks and other materials.
headpiece above suggest. But the American policy experience also shows that the closure of what has come to be known as the 'equity gap' is fraught with more complex problems of curriculum and pedagogy. Many early achievement gains have ceiling and transient effects, others are the artefacts of recent state testing systems that are not reflected in more robust performance measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Lee, 2006), with widespread residualisation of early skill gains amongst the most at risk students (i.e., ‘the fourth grade slump’) (Paris, 2006). Documented collateral effects of high stakes testing regimes include increased teacher attrition, and decreases in longitudinal patterns of retention and completion (Nichols, Berliner & Glass, 2006), and a diminution of Indigenous curriculum content (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). ‘Teaching to the test’ is both an intended and collateral policy effect, which reportedly has led to a narrowing and diminution of intellectually engaging, challenging and relevant knowledge in many schools (see Ravitch, 2010; Nichols & Berliner, 2006 for contrasting analyses of the same issue).

The empirical literature on what actually occurs in Australian classrooms – specifically, the Queensland School Longitudinal Achievement study (Lingard et al., 2001) and the New South Wales Pedagogies projects (Ladwig, 2005; Ladwig & Gore, 2005) - paints a very different picture than the view propagated in the media and public debates. These Queensland and New South Wales descriptive studies – methodologically based on urban school reform observational protocols (Newman & Associates, 1996) – suggest that the problem is not a lack of basic skills teaching. Based on systematic observations of large corp of randomly selected classroom lessons, these corroborate three robust findings from the school reform literature (e.g., Newmann and Associates, 1996; Resnick, 2008) and from Hattie’s (2007) meta-analyses of pedagogic effects. Sustained achievement gains amongst the most ‘at risk’ students require: (1) a everyday focus on curriculum content and issues of substantive intellectual demand and depth; (2) sustained scaffolded student talk and dialogue around issues of cultural and intellectual substance; and (3) visible connections of school knowledge to everyday civic, cultural, political and social life. The point is that basic skills acquisition is necessary but not sufficient for sustainable engagement and achievement.

In both studies, observational scales documented current dominant instructional patterns. Whether traditionalist/didactic or progressivist/activity-based – much of the instruction observed was devoted to basic skills and basic curriculum content. Despite the stereotypes and anecdotes circulated in the press of unprincipled progressivism, the propagation of politically correct value stances, and rampant classroom experimentation with new media forms – the classroom observation studies found high frequencies of classroom lessons where students are completing worksheets, copying of the board, answering questions at the end of chapters and engaged in activity-based ‘busy work’ of various orders. Further, the assessable tasks set by teachers often focused on lower order domains of activity, such as recall, reassembly of existing and provided information and skill repetition. The overall picture counters the Vygotskian axiom of teaching in advance of development, of stretching students’ knowledge, tool-using capacities and imagination beyond what they can readily do.
A View from the Field

To fill in this with a picture from the field, I turn to early findings of two ARC funded projects currently underway. In a quantitative study of the impacts of social class on year 1 literacy instruction and achievement, Sue Grieshaber, Paul Shield, Shelley MacDonald and I surveyed and interviewed a random stratified sample of 106 year 1 teachers/classrooms in 44 greater Brisbane metropolitan area schools, with achievement data on 650 of their students. The three year study examined social class and home literacy resources of families, teacher self-reported curriculum emphases in early literacy, and results on three outcome measures: standardized reading achievement test results, a ‘best examplar’ narrative or descriptive writing sample, and teacher moderated judgments on a language/literacy developmental continuum. While data analysis is still underway as this piece goes to press, early descriptive findings (Luke, Grieshaber, Shield & MacDonald, 2009) are telling:

- That low IRSED schools have an overrepresentation of teachers with less than 4 years experience; while mid and high IRSED schools have an overrepresentation of teachers with 20 years or more of experience.
- While low IRSED families have significantly less print resources than other groups, there are no significant differences between IRSED groups in composite indicators of home print and media practices. Further, low IRSED parents reported higher expectations that their children would enter Year 1 some basic reading and writing skills than parents in mid-high and high IRSED groups.
- That teachers in low IRSED schools concentrated on direct instruction in alphabatics: including, a focus on phonemic awareness, drill in grapheme/phoneme generalisations, alphabetic knowledge, and knowledge of basic print conventions. Teachers in low IRSED schools reported an average of 550 minutes per week of instructional emphasis on coding.
- Teachers in mid and high IRSED schools reported overall less instructional time on coding and on all aspects of literacy instruction then low IRSED schools.

These findings raise questions about many of the assumptions driving the current curriculum debate, many of which are beyond the scope of this article. One key finding is that: initial literacy training is strongly emphasizing basic coding and alphabetic knowledge. In Queensland urban primary schools, the ‘basics’ are a strong curriculum focus.

This has been illustrated in the first year of another ARC study, where a QUT and Queensland Teachers’ Union research team are focusing on the relationships between digital and print literacies across the curriculum in a low socioeconomic school with a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and high overall levels of special needs ascertainment (Luke, Dooley & Woods, in press/2010). While working in classrooms and undertaking curriculum planning with teachers, we have observed a strong emphasis on the teaching of basic skills in reading and writing. This includes knowledge of print, phonics-based initial literacy instruction, direct instruction in genre, and, with
systemic in-service support, the development of “strategy-based” approaches to upper primary comprehension instruction. In the last year, with policy foci on improvement of NAPLAN achievement test scores and the public release of the MySchools website reporting on individual school test score achievement – teachers have focused increasingly on: (1) increasing attendance and time-on-task through school-wide behaviour management systems; (2) explicit emphasis on direct instruction in skills likely to be tested and in test-taking procedures and formats.

One collateral effect has been lack of attention to substantive cultural and literary, intellectual and community content (Nixon, Comber & Kerin, 2009). For members of this teaching staff – many within their first 4 years of teaching - curriculum planning time is spent checking and reporting back to the school and system authorities whether activities and lessons cover reading and language development skills and exposure to specific genres.

Our observations in this school instantiate the Queensland and New South Wales school observation data. There is a strong emphasis on basic skills – adixed with various self-contained lesson ‘activities’ with various degrees of focus on specific skill-acquisition goals. The current situation, school administrators hope, will yield enhanced student performance on decoding and comprehension sections of NAPLAN tests. But we and the school’s administrators and curriculum leaders have noted little direct engagement with matters of intellectual and cultural substance. Sustained engagement with specialized field and disciplinary knowledge from the sciences, humanities and social sciences, and their affiliated technical registers is rare; scaffolded dialogue about issues of literary and moral content is infrequent; and community-based cultural knowledge, issues or texts are rarely addressed in the classroom. The enacted curriculum has a strong focus on the lesson and activity-based transmission of basic skills with little sustained or conceptually coherent focus on knowledge, broadly construed.

We are exploring the specific combination of factors which have led to this situation (e.g., teachers’ levels of content and pedagogical content knowledge, the concentration of inexperienced teachers in low IRSED schools, an emphasis on high-stakes testing as the principal benchmark of school effectiveness, and the widely shared belief that children still developing basic literacy and numeracy cannot manage rich content or challenging ideas). For our present purposes, I would offer the following working hypothesis to the debate over the Australian curriculum:

- That the closure of the ‘equity gap’ in Australian education cannot be addressed by a principal policy emphasis on the teaching and high stakes testing of basic autonomous skills and behaviours;

- That longitudinally-sustained improvement in the performance of students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous communities will require an enacted curriculum that features: intellectually challenging, demanding and interesting knowledge; sustained and scaffolded linguistic interaction around and about that knowledge; and demonstrable links
between school knowledge and the everyday realities of Australian life, cultures and work.

Calls for a “return to the basics” have been recurrent in Australian education over the past five decades, usually corresponding to periods of major social and economic change (Green, Hodgens & Luke, 1997). Yet there is evidence here of a national ‘over-correction’ to a perceived loss of the basics – prior to the finalisation of a national curriculum. Commenting on trends in PISA reading achievement, Barry McGaw (2010) recently commented that:

Australia’s rank dropped because the Australian mean performance declined to 513 in 2006 from 528 in 2000 and 525 in 2003. This decline, which was statistically significant, occurred primarily because of a decline in performances at the highest level. The reasons for this are not immediately evident from the data but it is at least clear that it is due to schools focusing more on basic achievement levels and not so much on the development of sophisticated reading of complex text. (McGaw, 2010, p. 5).

If the national curriculum aims to address the equity gap, it would need to take up Resnick’s (2010) challenge: the situating and articulation of basic skills into a curriculum that is knowledge-rich, that developmentally articulates into a fuller intellectual and scientific, cultural and social engagement with 21st century issues, contents and proficiencies.

**Upping the Ante**

To date, the Australian Curriculum has the hallmarks of the new generic, transnational curriculum settlement that emerged in the late 1990s as a response to new economic and social contexts. This features a focus on basic skills acquisition and a taxonomic reinstatement of canonical content knowledge in literature, science and history. It attempts to address the emergence of digital cultures and transnational economies through a complex overlay of ‘new capacities’ to be ‘embedded’, integrated and indexed against traditional basics and subject knowledge. In this regard, its structural categories and technical form resemble curricula of most Canadian provinces, New Zealand, the UK, many US states, Hong Kong, and Singapore. All of these systems, furthermore, state a policy commitment to the production of human capital for ‘new economies’, to equitable access, and to quality and competitive ‘innovation’. This is the new generic curriculum settlement. Further, international comparative studies such as PISA and TIMMS have spurred convergence towards a *defacto* transnational standardisation (and hence, skill and knowledge description) in early childhood learning, mathematics, sciences, and, indeed, literacy (see European reviews in Hopmann, Brinek & Reitzl, 2007). Within these structural parameters, whatever might count as distinctively ‘Australian’ would appear within these structural boxes (e.g., literary content, historical knowledge, contextual content).

This said, the test of the Australian Curriculum is whether it ups the intellectual ante and educational bar. It is worth considering at length Resnick’s (2010) retrospective view of the chain of events that have driven US educational policy since the initiation of bipartisan educational reform:
Current policy discussions often aim to solve the problem of disappointing levels of learning by investing heavily in theories of performance management. The prescription for better performing schools ... is more frequent measures of student performance and greater attention to this “output” data (in economists’ terms, “productivity”). This has led to a virtual industry of student measures that can be administered early and often, in the form of interim, or benchmark, tests. As noted earlier, these tests have come to control the de facto curriculum, as school districts and school principals – worried about poor performance on state accountability instruments – prescribe more and more test preparation, mostly in the form of practicing items that are very like the ones that will appear on the state tests. These items, for reasons of cost, familiarity, and certain psychometric considerations, are mostly simple multiple-choice questions, with little opportunity for the kind of interpretive knowledge work that the Thinking Curriculum calls for. This growing practice, encouraged by the offerings of test providers, inflates attention to the end-of-year test items and exaggerates the “basics skills” character of the standards movement. (Resnick, 2010, p. 187)

In Resnick’s view, the task at hand is a cognitively demanding, intellectually rich “thinking curriculum”. She argues that this will require in the US an increased focus on improving teacher substantive content and field knowledge and the enhanced development of curriculum specific pedagogical practices. Her warning is blunt: “systems that aim to develop extended knowledge and complex forms of argument and reasoning among students will fail if teachers are restricted to scripted lessons that close off discussion” (p. 196).

The view from the field tells us that a similar policy sequence – already a decade old in the US and UK – is well apace in Australian schools. It is axiomatic that the higher the stakes designated to standardized assessment – the more that teachers, principals and school systems will subordinate or disregard elements of the official curriculum not formally assessed. This said - the policy settings of league tables, standardized testing, and media critique of teachers and standards are likely to generate short term test score gains, once NAPLAN instrumentation has been fully stabilised, especially in the early years. But should the patterns follow US and UK medium and longer term results – which happen to extend beyond the immediacy of 3 and 4 year electoral cycles – we are likely to see ceiling and threshold effects in school and jurisdiction test performance, upper primary residualisation of performance among equity groups, ongoing primary/secondary transition issues, and largely unchanged retention, graduation and tertiary participation rates – the latter contingent upon extrinsic economic factors of demand.

The test of this national curriculum – and its affiliated policy settings around assessment, funding and teacher professionalism - will be whether it sets the conditions for yet another ‘back to the basics’ movement – with the potential to further narrow, fragment and trivialize the enacted curriculum - or whether it succeeds in focusing systems’, bureaucrats’, teachers’ and teacher educators’ and, ultimately, students’ conversations on matters of intellectual demand, cultural meaning and substance, disciplinary and communities’ content
knowledge, ideas traditional and radical, and on an exploration of the complex and critical issues, designs and knowledges for new economies and risky worlds.

Its task will be arduous: for it must supplant a defacto enacted curriculum of test preparation and basic skills that many presume is the solution.

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**References**


