

To lift standards, we must reclaim the curriculum

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Much has been written about declining Australian performance in school education. We are falling further behind other countries and we perform at lower levels today than in the past. The reading performance of Australian 15-year-olds in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment in 2018 was about nine months behind that of their counterparts in 2003. Inequity is also increasing; we are heading towards a million students performing below minimum levels of reading by the end of the decade.

Australia has a vast array of state and federal policies and programs aimed at improving teacher quality, leadership, literacy and numeracy, and so on. But none of them has moved the needle. Why not? The reason is that significant improvement is impossible when Australian curriculum policy is so fundamentally flawed.

The foundation of any school system is its curriculum: what is taught and learnt in classrooms; the instructional materials used, the books students read, the learning tasks they complete; the essays they write.

Across recent decades, Australia has moved further and further away from ensuring that high-quality curriculum is taught and assessed in classrooms. At a system level we don't even know what is taught in most classrooms. We don't know what students learn, what books they read, what projects they do, what assignments and essays they write.

This is the fundamental problem in Australian education. We will never get significant improvement unless we address it. But how? We need to go back to the basics of curriculum and curriculum policy, and to three overarching issues in particular:

1. The curriculum taught in classrooms is essential for learning. Recent research shows that students who were taught using high-quality mathematics instructional resources across four consecutive years outperformed their counterparts by an additional four years of learning. In short, getting quality curriculum into classrooms has a greater impact than all the money spent on teacher development and training has ever achieved.
2. Curriculum taught in classrooms is vital for equity. Ensuring that all students – regardless of their background – have access to a quality curriculum is the foundation of educational equity. The more that wealthy students have a different curriculum to disadvantaged students, the more educational inequality increases.
3. Curriculum determines much of the effectiveness of other policies. Quality curriculum is a driver of improved teacher practice, but the reverse is also true; improvements in teacher practice have a reduced impact on student learning if the curriculum taught in a classroom is poor.

In recent years, the international research has focused increasingly on the need to ensure that high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum is taught in classrooms, and that students' skills are developed through the learning of detailed sequenced knowledge.

This expanding body of research highlights the importance of the specifics of what is taught in classrooms. For example, student learning in mathematics is shaped most not by high-level directions about mathematics but by specific, detailed instructional materials used in

classrooms. Similarly, the specifics of what is taught to wealthy and disadvantaged students determine the impact on equity in mathematics learning.

And here lies the problem in Australian education.

All the research says we have to focus on the detail of what is taught in classrooms. Yet education policymakers in Australia – unlike those in high-performing, high-equity systems such as Alberta, Hong Kong and Japan, and the effective reformers in British Columbia and Finland – develop and discuss curriculum in a very high-level way, leaving it to teachers to make the critical decisions.

The Australian Curriculum specifies learning areas or subjects to be taught, achievement standards for what students are expected to learn in different subjects each year, key content descriptions, and additional skills and content that students need to learn.

What is critical is that the standards, knowledge and content in the curriculum are all high-level. There is none of the detail that the research says is so important.

Teachers' choice

Teachers must then decide how to take the high-level curriculum and work out what to teach and assess in their classrooms. They must turn high-level content descriptions, optional content elaborations and achievement standards into precise learning objectives for students, the knowledge to be taught within and across subjects, the sequence in which it is taught and what that means for the knowledge that students develop across the entire curriculum.

They must choose instructional materials, texts and activities, along with the learning tasks that students will complete. They must work out how to assess student learning; how to ensure students are at grade level, what is an A, B, C and so on, and how to make sure these assessments are consistent – are moderated – across classrooms. These are just some of the decisions that Australian teachers have to make.

High-performing and high-equity systems, on the other hand, make most of these decisions. These systems have more explicit and detailed curriculum and provide comprehensive guidance, resources and supports to teachers.

Let's compare the experience of science teachers in Australia and in Singapore. In Singapore, science teachers are provided with detailed information and guidance on the specific content they should teach, the level of detail of that content and what should be prioritised. They have a list of approved textbooks to use, and access to curated quality instructional resources, learning tasks and assessments, so they understand how to best teach the content and how to assess student learning. Teachers can adapt and adopt materials as they see fit but the level of guidance they receive gives them a clear baseline of what to teach and assess in classrooms.

In Australia, by contrast, this level of detail or guidance is not provided. When year 8 science teachers look at the Australian Curriculum, they see that they must teach “the relationship between the structure and function of cells, tissues and organs in a plant and an animal organ system and explain how these systems enable survival of the individual”. But they are left to decide on the detail of which plant and animal organ systems to teach, the level of detail they should go into, the amount of time to spend teaching it, the learning tasks and experiments that will best support student learning, and the instructional materials to use. They must also design or select appropriate assessments to measure student learning against the achievement standards. Each of these decisions and actions affects what is

taught and assessed. And when every teacher across the country is left to make those decisions on their own, the result is large variation in what students learn.

In English, the knowledge learnt is largely determined by the texts that are taught – not simply the book read in the first semester of year 9 but all texts read across a student's schooling. A high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum ensures that all students have the chance to read great works of literature; texts from different authors, cultures and eras in a way that builds their knowledge and understanding of the world over time. For this reason, the texts chosen in a curriculum are incredibly important for both student learning and equity.

But in Australia, except for the senior secondary years, we don't specify what texts students should read in English. We leave those decisions to teachers. In doing so, we can't guarantee that students will read texts over their school life that build their knowledge and understanding of the world in a coherent and consistent way. Instead, the books students read – and the learning experiences they have – vary greatly from classroom to classroom. The story, which is similar for virtually any subject taught in our schools, shows how we have lost our way in curriculum in Australia.

In short, what makes a curriculum high-quality and knowledge rich is all in the detail. Curriculum that makes specific knowledge optional or interchangeable is not knowledge-rich and will lead to reduced learning and equity.

Teachers and school leaders, it is vital to say, are not to blame. They spend countless hours trying to ensure that quality learning occurs in their classrooms. But we as a country simply don't support them in the way that systems with better learning and equity outcomes do.

Instead, we place a huge burden on teachers' time to develop lesson plans and find or create high-quality instructional resources. Many teachers say that replicating this work across every school across the country is a poor use of their time and is adding greatly to high teacher workloads. The Productivity Commission's interim report on the National School Reform Agreement shows that teacher workload is the biggest reason why teachers are leaving the profession.

Even the most experienced Australian teachers and leaders regularly say that they not only want but need more support – the support that their peers in other countries receive as a matter of course.

Don't get us wrong. Australian teachers can access hundreds – if not thousands – of resources. Governments and curriculum bodies provide a wide range of resources. But very little of it is connected or developed in a comprehensive manner. As many Australian teachers have said to us, they can access thousands of resources and supports from the government or on the web, but they don't know which are high-quality, which resources fit together and in what sequence.

Complex work

What, then, is stopping us from providing more help to our teachers? Too often we hear that providing detailed guidance or high-quality lesson plans or units of work will take away teacher autonomy and deskill teachers. It is a strange argument that providing the curriculum resources that many teachers say they need, and that are provided to teachers in high-performing, high-equity countries, is somehow wrong. Do we really think that teachers in places such as Singapore, Finland, and Japan have been de-skilled? Are Australian teachers more professional than Canadian teachers because Australian teachers receive less support?

We need to recognise the complexity of the work required for quality curriculum and resources to be developed and provided to schools. Systems that do this work well have regularly spent tens of millions of dollars over a number of years developing high-quality curriculum and instructional resources. It is mind-boggling that we leave this work for Australian teachers to do in their spare time.

At the policy level we continually underemphasise the complexity of curriculum work and the expertise required to do it well. The curriculum resources produced by systems around the country are of highly varied quality. In many instances it is clear that resources have been produced without a common understanding of the recent research and what quality curriculum and instructional materials look like.

When we speak to system leaders in other countries that have done this work they emphasise the importance of making the call on what is and is not taught in classrooms. Everywhere in the world, curriculum is an incredibly contested space. No one has ever produced a high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum anywhere in the world that everyone agrees is perfect. But making the call on the detail of what is taught in classrooms is fundamental to the development of a world-class curriculum. The detail is what matters.

Unfortunately, this goes against the grain of developing Australian curriculum, where consensus and compromise are considered vital. In recent decades, the main way we have achieved consensus between those who disagree is to have bits of both perspectives, to compromise on key issues, or to simply make the curriculum so high-level that anyone holding any perspective can see themselves in the curriculum.

Quality curriculum requires making a call on the detail of what needs to be taught in classrooms. Consensus-driven approaches and the brutality of politics can make this impossible. What minister wants to have a public fight over which book should be taught in year 8 English or what history content to include in the primary school curriculum?

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, the body that develops our national curriculum, was deliberately set up with a consensus-style approach and structures to gain consensus from all states and territories for a national curriculum.

This has many political advantages but it means that ACARA cannot make the call about the detail of what should be taught.

Key mistake

It is easy to point the finger at the national government, at ACARA or at the states. But more often than not, people are just doing the job they are supposed to do. The key mistake we continue to make is not acknowledging the pitfalls and restrictions of our institutions and ways of working; of not recognising that while a consensus approach may be great for politics, it's terrible for producing a quality, knowledge-rich curriculum.

Precisely for this reason, some governments around the world don't produce curriculums and instructional resources themselves. Instead, they establish other mechanisms to ensure that high-quality curriculum materials are produced and taught. What can this look like?

First, we must recognise the complexity of this work and the expertise required to do it effectively. This requires governments to establish what quality instructional materials looks like before materials are produced. Extensive curriculum knowledge mapping is required to identify what needs to be taught, and at what level, and then benchmarking this against high-performing systems around the world.

Second, systems can then fund private providers (often not-for-profit organisations) to develop resources according to strict quality criteria. This can help establish more high-quality curriculum providers that may complement materials produced within government. International practice also highlights the benefits of adapting quality instructional resources from around the world rather than producing everything from scratch. Australia's way of working always seems to be to produce everything ourselves and ignore what is done elsewhere. This approach reduces our understanding of quality and simply piles up the work.

Third, evaluation of the materials produced is critical. Several high-performing, high-equity systems around the world, such as Hong Kong and Finland, have a long history of evaluating textbooks and curriculum and instructional materials, then recommend resources to their schools and advise against those that don't meet quality criteria. They also work with providers to identify where materials did and did not meet quality criteria, discouraging rogue providers, and allowing the genuine ones to improve their materials over time.

Fourth, some systems set specific assessments that push schools (and the providers of curriculum materials) to use curriculum materials that best support student learning. Importantly, the assessments are not multiple-choice, skill-based exams that we often favour but comprehensive knowledge-based exams and assessments that increase the quality of what is taught across the system.

There is hope

All these mechanisms have driven improvements in systems. Not all may be equally applicable to the Australian context, but they highlight the policy options available to government while reducing the impact of the political fights that dominate and weaken Australian curriculum and curriculum policy. They also help bring more expertise, resources and supports to ensure quality curriculum in our schools. For years, Australian philanthropy has looked for ways to make investments that improve equity and learning in our schools. These mechanisms could lead to effective philanthropic investments in Australia, as they have done overseas.

There is hope. A small but growing number of education leaders understand the problems in our approach to curriculum and want to fix them. A decade ago, Queensland took a giant step forward with the curriculum materials it provided to schools. More recently, the South Australian Education Department undertook one of its best reforms in years and produced detailed units of work that provide a great help for its teachers. More work is needed in both systems but they have shown that meaningful curriculum reform is possible.

Curriculum reform is fundamental to system improvement. It shouldn't replace policies we have to improve teaching and school leadership, but the research shows that our investments in these areas won't have the impact we want unless we undertake real curriculum reform to ensure quality knowledge-rich curriculum in all our classrooms.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/to-lift-standards-we-must-reclaim-the-curriculum/news-story/0e7ebc17925b3976f6a59514c21510f0>