

Who is the Australian Curriculum really for?

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1 May 2021

The success of our education systems is largely determined by what children experience daily in their classrooms. Decisions about what children read, the essays they write, the problems they solve and the learning tasks they complete all have a huge impact on their learning. With a new draft of the Australian Curriculum up for comment, many may assume it will result in some major classroom shifts. But in Australia that's not how curriculum works.

With the new draft curriculum, there is a lot of debate and expert opinion floating around on what it means for school education. What is new and what has been discarded? What does it mean for our global rankings? What teaching practices does it promote?

On one level, this makes sense. We should debate and agree on what we expect all kids to learn. But on another level we completely miss the point: the changes to the Australian Curriculum, and the debate surrounding it, are related only loosely to what happens in a classroom. There are fundamental structural issues with curriculum policy in Australia that we don't talk about. We therefore regularly miss key opportunities for improvement.

It is natural to think the Australian Curriculum is about all of the things that kids do in classrooms. This is what curriculum means in many other countries around the world. Elsewhere, curriculums focus on what matters for students, providing clarity, detailed guidance and teaching resources on what is to be taught in classrooms.

Not in Australia. Curriculum in Australia is very high-level. We provide much less curricular support and fewer instructional resources than what is provided to teachers in Canada, Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong and other countries at the top of the global rankings.

Not only do we not provide this support in Australia but we also make the curriculum harder and more complicated for teachers.

The Australian Curriculum is developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. This is a national body, but school education is the constitutional responsibility of the states. Each state has agreed to implement the Australian Curriculum and their federal funding is tied to that.

But implementation can mean many things. NSW and Victoria have their own curriculums. Other states develop their own instructional resources for various subject areas that affect the actual curriculum taught in schools.

This highlights an incredibly important question that we don't debate: is the Australian Curriculum a document for state governments and non-government systems to take and then work out the best way to implement in their schools? Or is the Australian Curriculum a document that is directly aimed at teachers? The answer to both of these questions is — unfortunately — yes. This means we can't honestly judge the merits of the new Australian Curriculum; a change that may be great for states to implement in their school systems may be terrible for a teacher to implement in their classroom (and vice versa).

When ACARA released the new draft Australian Curriculum this week, it said it was a document for teachers. In the same breath it also said it was for states to implement in their schools.

We need to make a decision about who the Australian Curriculum is for. NSW and Victorian teachers are required to use the state curriculum, so why are they being told the Australian Curriculum is for them? Teachers in South Australia, Western Australia or Queensland have extensive curriculum resources provided by their state governments, so should they use those instead of the Australian Curriculum? When should teachers teach what their state government says and when should they teach what the Australian Curriculum says?

If you are getting confused, then welcome to the world of the Australian teacher.

When curriculum is hard to interpret, it can lead to teachers teaching vastly different things in many different ways. This leads to high variance in practice and learning. It also greatly increases teacher workload. Many teachers have no more than one hour a week of real curriculum planning time. So, the practicalities of school life further increase variance in the quality of teaching in Australian classrooms.

Many of the changes in the new draft curriculum are positive but, because of the reasons above, it is unlikely to really alter what happens in classrooms, which is open to state, school and teacher interpretation and all the constraints each face. For example, part of the Year 7 English curriculum involves students “establishing forums for discussing the relative merits of novels and film texts”. This allows a teacher to decide: what counts as a forum, what prompts to use to get kids discussing, what criteria might be used for comparing novels and films, what examples to point out to students to help their thinking, and how much class time to devote to this.

These are the things that the research shows matters to student learning.

The review of the Australian Curriculum largely tries to get at two big problems: first, an attempt to respond to the decade-long decline (both relatively and absolutely) in international assessments of student learning; and, second, the ubiquitous feedback from teachers that the current curriculum is confusing and unmanageable.

To truly address these concerns required a detailed focus on the curriculum being taught in Australian classrooms and how we can improve on it. This hasn't occurred. The starting point has never been a detailed analysis of what is happening in classrooms.

We look at international assessment data and ask for stakeholder feedback about the curriculum. But what's missing is what's most important: what does the daily lesson look like and how could it be improved?

If we started with what happens in a classroom, all of the curriculum debate would be a lot more meaningful. And we can't focus on the classroom until the structural problems in Australian curriculum policy are answered.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/who-is-the-australian-curriculum-really-for/news-story/1278398568c60f318e32b385c7470564>