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The Australian Curriculum: Silos on the horizon?



Futures educator DEBRA BATEMAN is extremely concerned about what she describes as the 'silo model' of curriculum that she sees as the foundation of the nascent Australian Curriculum.

AS a futures educator, there are some basic themes which underpin all of the work I do with schools. The first theme is that there is more than one future which is possible at personal and collective levels. The second theme is that all of us are able to contribute to the shaping of those futures. Most importantly, though, is the importance of taking the time to consider what futures we are actually talking about, especially when

planning curriculum within our schools. For students, this engagement with futures thinking is a way in which they can make explicit connections between what they are learning and the possibilities of what they might be doing and thus are able to use in their future lives. International research clearly highlights this 'futures thinking' as a missing dimension in educational policy and curriculum work.

Four silos under construction

The Australian Curriculum from a futures perspective is extremely worrying. This is a silo model of curriculum where singular subject offerings that are made are reminiscent of something offered in the 1950s. In the first offering of the Australian Curriculum, four silos will be offered – English, Maths, Science and History and, although within these silos there is some consultation, there has been little discussion about what has led to this historic and traditional (possibly federalism-enforcing) curriculum offering.

Given the impetus for an 'Education Revolution', it is astonishing that the Federal Government and its constituted curriculum body, ACARA, have not taken the necessary time to think about the ways in which various aspects of education can be improved so as to improve student outcomes (if, indeed, education's core business is indeed the students). There is little evidence, so far, of transformation but rather excessive evidence of recycling curriculum developed for other people's futures (Why are we still using curriculum models from the 1950s?). The most recent initiatives of State and Territory governments (since the last Federal Government's attempts to also introduce a national curriculum) have demonstrated a level of educational transformation.

Without exception, all States and Territories, at the very minimum, have sought to consider what are the 'Essential Learnings' for students in the compulsory years of schooling. Across the board, curriculum authorities identified those traditional subject areas such as numeracy and literacy, but they also highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary learning. Interdisciplinary learning occurs through the craftsmanship of teachers who are able to make connections between different bodies of information, along with ways in which these

'knowledges' are able to be applied or identified within students' worlds. (Quite different to a silo approach). This tiny step forward in educational reform is lost within this federal drive to colonise student learning. The money being thrown at this endeavour would have been welcomed in providing further professional learning for teachers, and in enabling State and Territory curriculum authorities to undertake new transformations of these latest initiatives, as opposed to them becoming redundant.

So, what *is* the agenda here? The rhetoric of Julia Gillard has been about the rapidly changing world and Labor election platforms promised that Australian students would be better able to participate within a global knowledge economy. Where, then, are these ideals identified within a vision statement for the Australian curriculum? And, more importantly, how are they articulated within the current draft curriculum statements available for consultation? As an example, how will a six-year-old child learning about the days of celebration within Australia's history assist that child to respond to a rapidly changing world? (In other publications I suggest that there are many ways, but I confess to being sceptical that the current curriculum writers would respond in a similar way.)

Need to nurture diverse communities

One curriculum will not produce a particular level of student outcome, in the same way that one curriculum will do nothing to enable students to critically consider the ways in which they contemplate their futures. And, there is not one curriculum (especially this proposed curriculum) that will address the diverse and multicultural communities that Australia claims to nurture. The Australian Curriculum is indeed worrying. Beyond colonising students' futures, it also attempts to colonise the ways in which students are able to be Australian learners across many settings. I think this curriculum might yet demand another national apology for the untold damage it does to diversity in Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Debra Bateman is a lecturer in education at Deakin University, in Victoria. She is an expert in futures education within school curriculum. Dr Bateman is strongly committed to ensuring success for all students even if that means unsettling the views of those who no longer take them into account. She can be contacted by email at: debra.bateman@deakin.edu.au.



Strong Words

School leaders are invited to provide their own views on the Australian curriculum, for possible publication in the next issue of *Leadership in Focus*. Email comments to: brydon@cybertext.net.au.

'The National Curriculum is the single most historic reform.'

Mr Peter Garrett, Federal Minister for Education, quoted in the *Liverpool Leader*, 10 October 2010.

'It seems to us that ACARA has mainly had teachers drafting the curriculum so far but what they really needed to have since they want this bold new approach is people who know a lot about science as well as teachers and curriculum developers.'

Professor John Rice, Executive Director of the Australian Council of the Deans of Science, quoted in the *Australian*, 6 October 2010.

'Criticism from teachers and academics has increased as the deadline looms for completing the curriculum for the first four subjects of English, maths, science and history. The common concern is overcrowding, cramming in too many topics and allowing insufficient time for deeper and more extensive study. . . The curriculum writers are becoming bogged down in detail.'

'The curriculum has been extended from the familiar disciplines to describe the study of contentious areas such as creativity, social competence and thinking skills. Yet members of the teaching profession point out that it has not provided a program of steps for learning the literacy and numeracy skills examined in national tests, which was one of its original requirements.'

Ms Justine Ferrari, writer, the *Australian*, 9 October 2010

[The new curriculum was] 'reverting to a 20th century model of education focused on learning content rather than preparing young people for a world requiring flexibility and skills in problem solving, technology, analysis and teamwork. . . There is no educational philosophy or curriculum theory that underpins the curriculum, nor is there an emphasis on the skills of learning. . . Content rules, at a time when critical, creative and divergent thinking is sorely needed.'

Ms Vicki Water, Principal, Pymble Ladies College, NSW, quoted in *North Shore Times*, 24 September 2010.