

The Australian Curriculum

A look through the lens of Christian education

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Abstract

The development of the Australian Curriculum is an ambitious task that involves meeting the needs of a large range of interest groups, each with its underlying philosophy and conceptualisation of what constitutes an effective and viable curriculum. The context of independent, Christian education systems and schools adds an important dimension to a discussion of the challenges that confront teachers and administrators as we move towards the implementation of a national curriculum. The observations and questions presented in this paper are not exhaustive, but are based on seminars and consultation sessions, discussions with a variety of teachers and subject coordinators, and wide reading of the documentation that has been forthcoming from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and other sources. The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion and reflection relating to the issues that confront teachers and educational institutions as they prepare for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, particularly in the context of Christian education.

Setting a context

The development of the Australian Curriculum is an initiative introduced by the Federal Government and managed at a national level under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). It is based on the premise, “A curriculum for the 21st century will reflect an understanding and acknowledgement of the changing nature of young people as learners and the challenges and demands that will continue to shape their learning in the future” (ACARA, 2009, p. 6).¹ The Australian Curriculum is conceptualised in terms of states and territories working nationally with the intention of “harnessing expertise and effort in the pursuit of common national goals” (p. 6). These

goals involve “national acceptance of responsibility for high-quality, high-equity education across the country” (p. 6).

In *The Shape Paper*, ACARA admits there is nothing new in the idea of national collaboration concerning education. The 1989 Hobart Declaration and the 1999 Adelaide Declaration are cited as examples. In particular, the paper focuses on the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) as providing an effective framework for developing an Australian Curriculum. An examination of the available documentation and comment on the draft curriculum for Phase 1, however, indicates there are still unresolved challenges and issues inherent in such an ambitious project. The context of Christian-based education provides an added dimension for discussing these issues and the ramifications of a national curriculum for independent, Christian schools across Australia.

At the heart of the conceptualisation of the Australian Curriculum is the issue of equity. Professor Barry McGaw, Chair of the National Curriculum Board (NCB) stated in a media release on 24 February 2009:

The key issue of equity and diversity relates to development of national curriculum that will be based on assumptions that all students are learners and every child matters. National curriculum will be accessible to all students and high standards will be expected while acknowledging the markedly different rates at which students develop (p. 1)

In spite of this underlying principle, however, there are anomalies and issues that need to be addressed.

General issues emanating from the Australian Curriculum

While it has been, and continues to be, of critical importance to examine specific learning areas included in Phase 1 (English, History, Mathematics and Science) and Phase 2 (Geography, the arts and languages) of the development of the Australian Curriculum, including opportunity for constructive feedback relating to the draft curriculum for each, it

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¹ For the purposes of this article, *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* will be referred to as *The Shape Paper*.

is also important to examine the 'big picture'. This includes issues that occur across the Australian Curriculum. The issues identified in this paper represent some of the major concerns. There are others that continue to be cause for debate.

1. Time allocation, timetabling and 'special character'

The issue of time allocation and timetabling emanating from the Australian Curriculum is likely to present schools with considerable challenge. This is particularly true of the history curriculum in the secondary school. Changes in the nature and volume of content for history 7–10, for example, call for more teaching time to be allocated to that subject area. This leads to the following questions: *From where will this additional time come? Will schools be expected to take time away from other subjects of critical importance such as English and Mathematics?* A related question is, *How will equity be determined in terms of time allocation for different learning areas?*

There is an extra dimension to this issue in the context of independent, Christian schools and systems, and this touches on the issue of 'special character'. A key aspect of schools within the Seventh-day Adventist system of education, for example, is that in both the primary and secondary school, time is allocated for the formal study of Christian biblical teachings, beliefs and interpretation. From a pragmatic perspective, it would be very easy simply to take time from this part of the curriculum and give it to mainstream subjects, such as history. The fundamental issue, however, is that doing so may begin to erode the 'special character' of the school.

Pastoral care and time given to the social, emotional and spiritual nurture of the child is also potentially under threat and this is a concern. If the fundamental philosophy of the school focuses on the development of the 'whole child', then it is of critical importance that time in the school curriculum is allocated to pastoral care. With the increasing demands on subject content and skill acquisition associated with the specific subject areas nominated in the development of Phases 1 and 2 of the Australian Curriculum, schools are under pressure to find that time in the timetable.

2. Funding considerations

There is no doubt that more resources, including more teachers, and certainly, ongoing and intensive professional development, will be needed not only to meet the requirements of the Australian Curriculum, but also to interpret what it means in terms of changes to existing school structures and resources.

This is particularly true if the intention of ACARA and the Federal Government is to ensure consistency in terms of interpretation and implementation across *all* the states and territories in Australia. Considerable financial pressure is already placed on schools and government departments of education. This begs the question, *Who will fund the necessary material and human resources, and who will fund the professional development of programs to assist teachers and educational systems to meet the demands implicit in the Australian Curriculum?*

Many independent and state/territory schools are facing intense financial challenge in the context of global economic trends. Careful and creative thought needs to be given to ways of addressing this issue and its considerable ramifications. In Queensland, for example, there are already moves to restructure the schooling system to accommodate the new focus on years 7 to 10 as one cohort. Traditionally, in that state, students in year 7 were still part of the primary school structure. Issues such as, *Who will teach the year 7 cohort, as they become part of the secondary school structure?* and *From where will the funding come to provide for all the ramifications of these structural changes?* add to the financial burden of school systems and state/territory government departments. This leads to considerations such as, *Will there be a need to make cuts in other areas of the school curriculum in order to accommodate the required transition to the Australian Curriculum?* Independent, Christian schools need to be aware that the focus on Christian teaching may be challenged because of funding considerations when the Australian Curriculum is fully implemented.

3. Assessment and reporting

Assessment is an integral part of curriculum development and implementation, yet it appears that the *nature* of assessment has not been an integral component of the process of developing the Australian Curriculum. This aspect of the proposed changes is open to debate. According to ACARA, the question of assessment is to be dealt with at the state/territory level and not at the national level. There are pragmatic reasons for this. If, however, it is left to the states and territories to determine assessment, how will this contribute to the *national* flavour of the Australian Curriculum? Surely it must be "national" across all components of the curriculum, including assessment and reporting.

There appears to be lack of clarity about the nature of assessment and reporting across the learning areas. Several issues arise from this. First, *If this truly is to be a national curriculum, what kind of assessment is to take place?* Second, *How is assessment of students to be reported?* ACARA has

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indicated that “achievement standards” will describe the *quality* of student learning that takes place, but there appears to be confusion as to how that will be reported. For example, there appear to be very few guidelines as to the interpretation of the proposed grading scheme. Finally, *How will consistency in the standard and quality of assessment be ensured across the states and territories?* It is logical to assume that the issue of consistency is fundamental to the interpretation and implementation of the Australian Curriculum, yet there appear to be glaring anomalies regarding the issue of assessment.

4. Core of knowledge, skills, understanding and values

Changes in and additions to History and Science content (K–10) may be problematic for some Christian schools. For instance, there are issues associated with the tension between teaching compulsory content and teaching Christian biblical interpretation of the origins of humankind and our history. These issues are not new, but an examination of the requirements of the Australian Curriculum provides opportunity to revisit key questions in the context of the ‘special character’ and core beliefs and values of independent, Christian schools. This may be particularly true when it comes to the biblical account of Creation as the origin of humankind.

The Shape Paper (ACARA, 2009) makes reference to the “core of knowledge, skills, understanding and values” that characterise the Australian Curriculum. In the available documentation, however, the core values do not appear to have been comprehensively identified. The key business of most schools and schooling systems in Australia is to educate the ‘whole child’ so that he or she is prepared to contribute positively to and function effectively as a member of society. In this context, the question of values is of fundamental importance.

An examination of the ten “general abilities” statement in *The Shape Paper* (ACARA, 2009, pp. 11–13) provides a reference point for inferring what those core values might be. For example, *Creativity*, one of these ten general abilities, infers placing value on problem solving, originality and divergent thinking. It also infers valuing qualities such as resilience and perseverance. Placed in the context of independent, Christian schooling, these core values, together with values based on Christian biblical principles, such as respect and love for God, and respect and love for fellow human beings, are of critical importance in how the Australian Curriculum can be assimilated into a Christian teaching and learning environment.

The Shape Paper (ACARA, 2009) also makes reference to student dispositions stating, “The curriculum will describe the knowledge,

understandings, skills and dispositions that students will be expected to develop, in sequence, for each learning area across the years of schooling” (p.9). At this stage, however, there does not appear to be a comprehensive exposé of what those dispositions might be. It is possible to infer specific student dispositions associated with the ten general abilities, but it would be more useful at a national level to have a comprehensive identification and description of those desirable dispositions.

From a Christian, biblical perspective, the nurture and development of worthwhile, Christ-like dispositions is of fundamental importance in the education of each child and the development of Christ-like dispositions is a key focus of teaching and learning that contributes to the ‘special character’ of the school. There are different interpretations of what dispositions are. A simple, but useful definition is, “Dispositions are inherent qualities that incline a person to act in consistent ways that can be observed through patterns of behaviour in particular contexts” (Faull, 2009, p. 14). An important aspect of those patterns of behaviour is the way values are activated in day-to-day living and learning. While *The Shape Paper* (ACARA, 2009) makes reference to dispositions, there is considerable scope for reflection and discussion regarding the identification of those dispositions that need to be nurtured and developed, not only in terms of success at school, but also in terms of their value for life.

5. Issues associated with achievement standards and outcomes

a) Achievement standards

The Australian Curriculum places emphasis on *achievement standards* when assessing and reporting on student learning. The ACARA documentation describes *achievement standards* in terms of the *quality* of learning experienced by students and states:

Achievement standards will provide an expectation of the quality of learning that students should typically demonstrate by a particular point in their schooling (i.e. the depth of their understanding, the extent of their knowledge and the sophistication of their skills). (ACARA, 2009, p. 13)

As an example, the achievement standard for Year 2 English, Listening and Speaking, is as follows:

By the end of Year 2, students listen to a range of spoken and media texts on familiar and learned topics. They understand and recall literal information and retell main ideas and two or more key facts. They use spoken language as a

learning tool, listening for details and instructions, asking and answering questions and engaging in talk-based learning situations. They begin to adapt spoken language to suit their audience and purpose. They use everyday talk to discuss ideas, and specific vocabulary about areas of interest. They use more formal language to engage in group and class discussions and to make oral presentations, including some detail, with conscious attention to voice, eye contact and gesture. They discuss how to interact differently with different people. They give opinions on topics of interest and provide some supporting evidence for their points of view. (ACARA, 2010, p. 14,15)

The example given typifies the achievement standards provided by ACARA in the draft curriculum. In this context, it becomes apparent that the phrase “description of the quality of learning” may be an issue. A closer look at the given example indicates little if any reference to the *quality* of learning. Rather, the achievement standard is expressed in terms of the *outcomes* of learning; that is, what students can do (skills) and what they know and understand (content). In the context of the NSW Board of Studies curriculum, these statements would be examples of *outcomes*, rather than descriptions of the *quality* of the learning that has taken place. Verb cues such as ‘understand’, ‘recall’, ‘retell’, ‘asking and answering’, and ‘discuss’ provide evidence of this focus on learning outcomes (skills, knowledge and understanding), rather than a description of the actual quality of learning that students experience.

This is one example of the problem with some terminology used in the ACARA documentation. The concept *achievement standard* is defined in one way (quality based), but is used in a different way (outcomes based). Confusion about the terminology may result in different interpretations of key concepts such as this. It is logical to assume that a critical aspect of the Australian Curriculum should be national consistency in the interpretation and use of the underlying concepts and the terminology used to describe and explain them.

In addition to the issue of concept clarity, a second group of issues associated with achievement standards can be framed by the questions, *Is there a minimum level of performance that each child must achieve?* and *What happens if students do not demonstrate that they have reached the required achievement standards for a given year?* If all students are to achieve the same high expectations, then arguably, the issue of achievement standards becomes even more complex.

From the NSW perspective, the Board of Studies curriculum makes a very clear distinction between outcomes and standards, with assessment being standards referenced and outcomes driven.

Outcomes are subject-specific. The distinction between the function of outcomes and standards, as well as their relationship in learning and assessment is clear. As in some other states and territories, there is reluctance in NSW to give up what is perceived as being an effective, clearly defined curriculum for another that is perceived as being problematic. This was evident in a recent article in The Sydney Morning Herald (13 September, 2010), where Anna Patty cited the NSW Board of Studies regarding the Australian Curriculum.

It is not possible for all students to reach high standards in deeper understandings and skills development with the current content overload... There is no scope for differentiation of curriculum to cater for the full range of student ability (para. 9).

b) Outcomes

The Shape Paper (ACARA, 2009) refers to “three broad categories of outcomes” (p. 9) taken from the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (p. 13). Arguably, these outcomes are so broad that a considerable number of other outcomes can be inferred from each. This raises two issues, firstly: *Is it intended that systems and teachers actually make these inferences?* and secondly *Does each state or territory infer its own meaning or is there to be national consistency in the interpretation and application of these outcomes?*

From a Christian perspective, the “three broad categories of outcomes” described in *The Shape Paper* provide a platform for further reflection and discussion. The first category is of particular interest and has to do with “A solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values on which further learning about adult life can be built” (ACARA, 2009, p. 9). In the description of this category of outcomes, reference is made to social and emotional intelligences. From the perspective of faith based teaching and learning, an interesting omission is spiritual intelligence. Reference is also made to national values. A Christian worldview calls for the inclusion of Christian, bible-based values. These considerations provide examples of outcome elements that, while contributing to the ‘special character’ of Christian schools and Christian teaching, are excluded from the Australian Curriculum.

In their response to Draft Phase 1 (K–10) of the Australian Curriculum, the Associated Christian Schools (2010) concluded with the statement, “ACS strongly urges ACARA to maintain, as a fundamental principle in the development of Australian curriculum materials, opportunities for faith based schools to preserve their diversity, flexibility in delivery of faith, culture and values, and independence” (p. 14).

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In order to preserve this diversity, flexibility and independence, it is vitally important that Christian schools and systems rigorously examine the Australian curriculum documentation and think carefully about the repercussions on their right to be distinctive at a time when states and territories are moving towards prescriptive content, skills and values that are secular in nature.

6. The issues of equity and discrimination

The development of any new curriculum needs to take into account the issues of equity and discrimination. In the context of these issues, the philosophy underpinning the Australian Curriculum is manifest in the statement:

...an alternative curriculum for students who are regarded as disadvantaged does not treat them equitably. It is better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations. (ACARA, 2009, p.8)

The Shape Paper also states, “The Board will not accommodate disparities by setting different expectations for different groups” (ACARA, 2009, p. 10).

The issues of equity and discrimination are not peculiar to the Australian Curriculum and these considerations have been a key element of curriculum development at the state and territory level. For instance, the New South Wales Government Charter for Equity in Education and Training (NSW, DET, 2005) indicates clearly, “We aim to improve overall education and training outcomes by focusing on those learners and groups of learners who are not benefiting fully from education and training” (p. 1).

The principles of equal opportunity for successful, meaningful learning resonate with the Christian, biblical principle that all children have the right to equal quality of teaching and learning. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum provides an opportunity to revisit the critical question of who the ‘disadvantaged’ students are and to clarify what it means to “provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance” to achieve “the same high expectations.” While there appears to be relatively strong emphasis on socio-economic considerations, as well as culturally marginalised and physically and/or intellectually challenged students who are disadvantaged, it is important to recognise that gifted students may also be disadvantaged if they do not receive the level of support required “to have a fair chance to achieve those expectations.”

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It should be noted that there is a difference between having *high* expectations for all students and having the *same* expectations for all students. There is scope for debate about the feasibility of all children achieving “the *same* high expectations”, even with differentiated levels of support. Pedagogic models such as the NSW Quality Teaching Model (NSW, DET, 2003) and Productive Pedagogies (Queensland, DET, n.d.) indicate it is imperative that teachers and educators have *high* expectations of all student groups. A critical consideration, however, is that student differences are taken into account. In doing so, it becomes evident that not all students are likely to achieve the *same* high expectations.

While most researchers and educational authorities (see, for example, Oswald, Johnson & Howard, 2003; Council of Australian Governments, 2006; Victoria, DEECD, 2006) agree that schools and teachers should set high expectations for all students, the thesis that all students should have the same high expectations is debatable. It could be argued, for example, that by having the *same* high expectations for *all* students, schools and educational institutions may be setting up some students for failure.

Nationally, at least at a systems or organisational level, it is of critical importance that the issues of equity and discrimination are part of the ongoing discussion and that there is consistency in the interpretation of concepts such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘same high expectations’, and ‘differentiated levels of support’ so that all disadvantaged students do, in fact, receive equitable levels of financial and human support. Arguably, unless this happens, in terms of having a fair chance to achieve ‘the same high expectations’, the question of equity becomes problematic and may result in unintentional discrimination against some student groups.

A truly national curriculum calls for consistency in all areas of support. In the context of independent, Christian schooling, there is the added dimension of equitable opportunity and high expectations for the spiritual nurture of all students. If there is to be an increased focus on subject content, with more time required to teach that content, then it is essential that Christian schools design and share strategies that help keep the spiritual dimension of teaching and learning alive and that set high, but realistic expectations for all students. In this context, the spiritual dimension of nurture is a critical component in the development of the ‘whole child’ and is of fundamental importance when considering the ‘special character’ of Christian schools. Arguably, it is in this area that all students can be nurtured in achieving equity in terms of the same high expectations.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to present an overview of some of the issues inherent in the Australian Curriculum as the basis of discussion and creative problem solving. This time in the history of education and schooling in Australia provides a dynamic context for questioning and rethinking not only about school teaching and learning, but also teacher education. In particular, it provides independent, Christian systems of education with a valuable opportunity to rethink how they structure and resource education in this country.

It would be a mistake to denigrate the Australian Curriculum because there is much, in theory, to recommend it. The underlying principle of providing a curriculum based on equitable content, understanding and skills nation-wide is to be applauded, in spite of the monumental challenges this creates. The inclusion of all socio-cultural groups in the planning of such a curriculum deserves to be acknowledged, as does the push for ownership of literacy and numeracy across learning areas. Stakeholders involved in education need to be creative in designing specific, workable strategies for achieving these aims.

Taking into account student dispositions (see ACARA, 2009, p.9) and cross-curriculum perspectives, as well as content, understanding and skills is meritorious because it goes towards addressing the issue of educating the 'whole child' in a multi-cultural society. The question of nurturing appropriate student dispositions is particularly significant in terms of the ethos and culture of independent, Christian schools and requires carefully considered reflection and planning.

The fact that the Australian Curriculum is designed to accommodate different pedagogies, such as the NSW Quality Teaching Model (NSW, DET, 2003), provides further evidence of the positive intent of this initiative. Finally, the consultation process is a strong indicator of the serious endeavour to make the Australian Curriculum a truly national undertaking.

How do we, as Christian educators, prepare for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum? If ever there was a time to establish effectively functioning 'think tanks', it is now. If ever there was a time to liaise with and effectively communicate with each other regarding educational issues, including those raised in this paper, it is now. Educational systems and leaders, as well as individual teachers and schools, need to seize this opportunity for *really* making a difference in the quality of learning our children experience; for prioritising those aspects of teaching and learning that rise above national importance—those that are of *eternal* value. **TEACH**

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