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# Teachers' accounts of their curriculum use: external contextual influences during times of curriculum reform

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Curriculum reform is often described as being dependent on teachers' advancement of reform principles. Many studies report the reasons for whether teachers engage with a new curriculum, and these reasons have focused on internal, personal influences including disconnections between curriculum and teachers' beliefs and practices. This study investigates nine Australian primary teachers' accounts of their use of a new English curriculum from data obtained through semi-structured interviews. A thematic content analysis approach was used to analyse the interview transcripts, illustrating significant differences among the teachers in their use of the intended curriculum. The analysis provided four distinct influences on their curriculum use: the provision of professional development; curriculum and leadership roles; use of alternative or additional materials; and schools' prioritisation of particular learning areas. The findings demonstrate that the consistent use of these curriculum materials, as intended by designers, was appreciably influenced by factors external to the teachers. Implications for curriculum designers include the need for greater consideration of external contextual influences, such as: opportunities for teachers to access professional development, consideration of curriculum roles within schools, the thoughtful provision of additional or alternate curriculum materials, and recognition of the prioritisation of particular learning areas by schools.

**Keywords:** curriculum reform; professional development; teachers; English

## Introduction

The role of teachers in enacting curriculum has become an international concern following numerous implementations of new national curricula in schools around the globe. The results have contributed to a growing understanding that reform demands active engagement by teachers in their roles as curriculum makers (Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Teachers have long been seen as the key participants in governing the extent to which policies are realised in educational settings (Robinson, 2012; Day, 2014). Research shows that the successful implementation

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of a new curriculum is less likely to depend on directives issued by curriculum developers and more likely to depend on the support for implementation provided to teachers and schools (Fullan, 2007; Zhang & Liu, 2014). Indeed, warnings to curriculum reformers have continued to acknowledge the critical role of teachers in the implementation of the new curriculum, both in Australia and internationally (see Hargreaves, 2005; Priestley *et al.*, 2012; Harris & Graham, 2019). Porter *et al.* (2015, p. 115) even go as far as stating that teachers are ‘the ultimate enactors of any change effort, regardless of where it emanates’.

Research exploring influences on teachers’ use of curriculum has often focused on non-subject-specific foci (e.g. Priestley *et al.*, 2012; Biesta *et al.*, 2015), the examination of perceived curriculum ownership, the implementation strategy that facilitates collective sense-making (März & Kelchtermans, 2013), or the processes of change (Stoll, 1996). Our study fits with ‘a renewed focus on the individual teacher as an agent of change’ (Ramberg, 2014, p. 48). In contrast, this article aims to enhance current understandings of teachers’ relationships, while enlisting a subject-specific focus on the English curriculum. Acknowledging that curriculum does not simply translate into classroom practice but is instead taken up differently in different contexts (Beavers, 2001), this research involved a group of Australian primary school teachers and their use of the inaugural Australian Curriculum: English (hereafter AC:E). The focus of this study was not how the teachers implemented the reform, but rather, what is identified as influencing their use of the curriculum. As such, our paper aims to answer the research question: What are the influences on primary teachers’ use of the Australian Curriculum: English during the time of reform?

### **Teachers and curriculum reform**

Implementation is what ‘takes place between the formal enactment of a program by a legislative body (or, in some instances, a chief executive, or the courts) and its intended and unintended impacts’ (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981, p. xi). Howson and Wilson (1986) described differences in curriculum implementation by the terms intended curriculum (that which is prescribed by policymakers), implemented curriculum (the one that is enacted by teachers), and attained curriculum (the one that is learned by students). Research has shown frequent inconsistency in the fidelity of curriculum implementation, resulting in incongruity between the intended, the implemented, and the attained curriculum (O’Donnell, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2009). This study focuses on the teachers’ use of the intended curriculum, that is; ‘the overt curriculum that is acknowledged in policy statements as that which schools or other educational institutions or arrangements set out to accomplish’ (Schubert, 2010, p. 489).

The enactment of curriculum reform is, however, not solely dependent on individual teachers, but rather, part of a wider context connected to the climate and culture of the school, the district, the system as a whole (Fullan, 2007; Harris & Burn, 2011), and wider systemic issues (Seddon, 2001; Hoyle & Wallace, 2007). For example, the external administrative climate and school reform culture have led to teacher frustration and a ‘loss of professional autonomy’ (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 20). Other research has identified additional obstacles occurring at a contextual level, including organisational disunity, deficiency in the coordination of implementation

and inadequate planning, insufficient time given for implementation, and unsuitable communication from organisational stakeholders (Browne & Wildavsky, 1984). Research has shown that national curriculum mandates can be hindered by the tension between curriculum and policy rhetoric and what Fullan (2007, p. 23) calls the 'subjective reality' that teachers meet in their everyday teaching contexts.

An important contextual influence is this subjective reality is the inclusion of professional development, which are seen as opportunities to change practice and knowledge (Kisa, & Correnti, 2015). The presence of professional development in reform is believed to be a requirement for successful implementation (Spillane & Thompson, 1997) as well as the development of teachers' knowledge and skills (Garet *et al.*, 2001). Professional development must be 'long-term and embedded within a school's daily routine, experiential, inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative, and geared at storing knowledge and networking outside of the school' in order to 'innovate either on current practices or by adopting and altering new practices' (Hill & Desimone, 2018, p. 104). Unless extensive professional development is received, teachers are likely to experience difficulty implementing the new curriculum with fidelity (Drummond, 2012).

Along with teachers' experiences and the curriculum materials themselves, Neves and Morais (2010) highlight the processes that occur during the generation of contextualised reproductions of curriculum. In order to match the institutional logic of the setting in which they are enacted, there is an assumption that curriculum needs to be modified as part of the culturally embedded school practices (Alvunger, 2018). Whether in answer to their own experience or their context when they actively responding to, generate recontextualisations, or enact the intended curriculum, teachers are not passive receivers of the reform process (Datnow, 2012). However, teachers' selection and adaptation of teaching and learning materials can only be consistent with those of curriculum developers if the teachers have knowledge of the intended curriculum itself (Davis & Varma, 2008).

### **The research context**

In our research context, the responsibility for Australian school education, including school buildings, infrastructure, and curriculum design and development, has historically been the separate responsibility of each state/territory. However, the past few decades have seen the Australian Federal Government increasingly involved in the provision and character of state and territory curricula, dispersing funding towards centralised programs and policies. The creation of a nationally agreed curriculum was a historic move amongst the states and territories of Australia. After years of discussion and debate, the end of 2011 saw the release of the first national curriculum requiring implementation in all states/territories. Hardy (2013, p. 207) described the national emphasis on standardised curriculum development and enactment as a context that 'reflects broader processes of more closely and coherently determining what constitutes 'official knowledge'. With the compulsory implementation of a national curriculum now in place, accountability on a national scale is evaluated by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's (hereafter ACARA) 'Reports on national curriculum monitoring' which involves evaluation of Australian school curriculum design, but also makes comparisons with international curriculum

developments and reports these publically (see the ACARA Annual Report 2018–2019, ACARA, 2019).

The ‘evolution’ (Cumming *et al.*, 2011, p. 43) of the English curriculum, in particular, has meant many changes in a context described as ‘a quagmire of political and educational agendas’ (Dilkes *et al.*, 2014, p. 45). There have been changes in content, structure and purposes, but perhaps the most notable change has occurred in definitions of literacy and English in a number of key policy documents over the previous decades. In the 1980s and 1990s the Hobart Declaration (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 1989) and the *National Literacy and Numeracy Plan* (MCEETYA, 1997a), concentrated on reading, writing and spelling as proxies for literacy. The 1999 *Adelaide Declaration* reiterated similar goals, stating that, ‘every child leaving the primary school should ... be able to read, write and spell and communicate at an appropriate level’ (MCEETYA, 1999, p. 9). Again, this national document centred the importance on reading, writing and spelling as fundamental, leaving skills such as viewing, listening, and speaking undefined (Cumming *et al.*, 2011).

Recognition of a ‘richer sense of literacy’ (Cumming *et al.*, 2011, p. 44) was seen in the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration* (MCEETYA, 2008) which included the reference to ‘interrelationships between literacies and technology and different media forms of the current era’ (Cumming *et al.*, 2011, p. 44). Finally, the framing document, *The Shape of the English Curriculum* followed in 2010 with continued acknowledgement of ‘listening, reading and viewing, writing, speaking and creating print, visual and digital materials’ (ACARA, 2010, p. 19). As a result, notions of English and literacy skills being interrelated, more complex, and including recognition of multimodality (Cumming *et al.*, 2011), were first used to rationalise the AC:E in 2011.

As a result of this evolution, the AC:E consists of three strands: language, literacy, and literature, which are further broken down into subcategories (see Figure 1) with each detailing students’ knowledge, understanding and skills in the areas of listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating (ACARA, 2014c). It is worth noting that the formulation of the three stands has been debated, particularly because although ACARA advised that English programs should integrate the three strands (2014c), no ‘satisfactory or substantive’ guidance has been given (Green, 2018, p. 270). Also concerning are the findings of Davies and Sawyer (2018, p. 836) who found the literature strand was ‘seen to be almost arbitrary to the fundamental imperatives of the Curriculum—a means through which the cultural intentions of the Curriculum might be serviced’.

At the time of data collection, the AC:E contained content descriptions, that ‘describe the knowledge, understanding, skills and processes that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn, but do not prescribe approaches to teaching’ (ACARA, 2014a, para 12). A further component was the elaborations, which ‘illustrate and exemplify content and assist teachers in developing a common understanding of the content descriptions’, although they ‘are not intended to be comprehensive content points that all students need to be taught’ (ACARA, 2014a, para 12). Additionally, Year Level Achievement Standards ‘describe the quality of learning (the extent of knowledge, the depth of understanding and the sophistication of skills) that would indicate the student is well placed to commence the learning required at the next level of achievement’ (ACARA, 2014b, para 2).

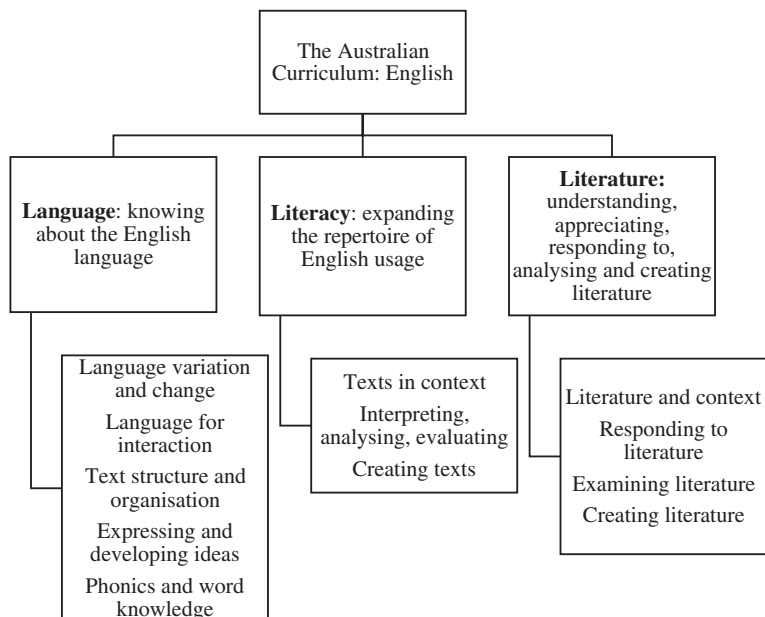


Figure 1. Structure of the Australian Curriculum: English

With the AC:E being made available as an online and downloadable resource, rather than distributed in paper form, the actual rollout of the Australian Curriculum was the responsibility of each state and territory's education department. One state, that of Queensland, had an Education Department that developed complete teaching materials called *Curriculum into the Classroom* (hereafter C2C) for a number of curriculum areas, including English. Barton *et al.* (2014, p. 167), in their review of the C2C implementation process, found that 'the expectation that teachers use this material was particularly evident in ongoing publicity and information sessions prior to implementation'. One of the few documented discussions relating to the implementation of the C2C highlighted the use of 'a "one size fits all" and "top-down" approach' as failing to take into consideration the need for reflective implementation where curriculum materials are 'open to discussion' and adapted to each context (Barton *et al.*, 2014, p. 176).

## Method

The case study research was selected to support a deep and rich description of the context within which the teachers were working (Creswell, 2009) where the opportunity for examining the influences on their use of curriculum was provided by the on-going implementation of curriculum reform. In this instance, the case consisted of a small group of primary teachers who was responsible for enacting the AC:E, but who had varied levels of teaching experience and worked in a variety of teaching contexts. Case studies allow researchers to focus on 'individual actors or groups of actors and seeks to understand their perceptions of events', while acknowledging subtleties and complexities to be considered (Cohen *et al.*, 2007 p. 254). With the context of



curriculum reform providing a group of actors in our primary teachers, we focused on their accounts of ‘an instance in action’ and the ‘unique’ (Simons, 2009) in their descriptions of curriculum use. As is characteristic of the case study methodology, we explored of the boundary between the experiences and contexts of these teachers (Yin, 2009).

First, purposeful sampling allowed a choice of participants based on the needs of the research and the requirements relating to the participants’ ‘typicality and possession of a particular characteristic being sought’ or the need for a ‘sample from which the most can be learned’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 114–115). In order to locate teachers in the field to be selected for an interview, the purposeful sampling strategy of snowballing was utilised. This strategy involved the researchers ‘snowballing’ from one case to another, beginning with our own broad professional environments (Flick 2018). The criteria for the selection in the snowballing sampling was for the participants to be primary school teachers who were responsible for the teaching of the AC:E.

From the 12 names provided during the snowballing process, Author 1 employed non-probability maximum variation sampling, described as ‘a strategy by which units are selected for the sample because they provide the greatest differences in certain characteristics’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 113). In our study, we sought a range of teachers who met the criteria of having varied educational backgrounds, current teaching contexts, and levels of prior teaching experience. As such, the participants finally selected were nine primary school teachers who had varied levels of teaching experience but who were responsible for the teaching of the AC:E in a range of Australian primary schools in three states (Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria). Table 1 provides pseudonyms and contextual details for the nine participants.

Using semi-structured individual interviews for data gathering, two years after the reform began, a qualitative approach was used to capture ‘pictures using words’ (Mertens, 2010, p. 6). Interviews were deemed the most appropriate tool to gain teachers’ accounts, permitting opportunities to share their stories and to ‘provide rich, naturally occurring, accessible data which have real effects on the world’ (Silverman, 2001, p. 152). The nine interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone (due to the significant physical distance between the researcher and the participant) and resulted in over 720 minutes of recordings. The average length of the interviews was 81 minutes; however, these interviews captured data for a larger study and the results reported here are related to only one set of findings from within the wider study. This wider study examined seven areas of the teachers’ Pedagogical Content Knowledge for teaching English in the primary classroom, with a focus on children’s literature. The findings reported in this article relate to one of the components, the teachers’ *knowledge of curriculum*, which Shulman (1986, p. 10) described as a teacher’s ‘tools of the trade’.

The analysis of data was made through the identification of themes, patterns, and categories, or what is known as thematic content analysis in order to provide rich, detailed accounts that are also complex in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with immersion in the data in order for the insights to become clear to the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2004). This involved listening to the recordings of the interviews numerous times, then reading the transcripts, while listening to the recordings.

Table 1. Research participants

Participant	Teaching experience	Teaching context at time of data collection
Annie	27 years in various contexts in private and state schools	Year 4 in an inner-city private school in Queensland
Beatrice	25 years in different states of Australia	Year 5 in a suburban state school in Queensland
Claire	22 years in a range of urban and rural contexts	Year 6 in a rural/suburban, state school in Queensland
Denise	20 years in a range of urban and rural contexts	Year 3 in a suburban state school in Queensland
Ellen	8 years including Australian rural communities with high refugee populations	Prep year in an urban, private primary school in New South Wales
Freya	7 years in mostly urban school settings	Year 6 in an urban, private primary school in Victoria
Gillian	6 years including a year as a teacher in a School of the Air	Year 1 in a suburban state school in Queensland
Henry	4 years, including one year as a teaching principal in an Indigenous community	Multi-age class in a rural state school in Queensland
Ian	3 years including time in a Special Education Program	Year 6 in a suburban, state school in Queensland

Next, coding took place, which involved 'moving forward and back through the transcripts, drawing on in-depth knowledge connected with the study, returning to the study question, and thinking in terms of systems and theoretical concepts' (Green *et al.*, 2007, p. 548). Finally, looking for commonalities, differences, and relationships within the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009), allowed the identification of themes. Examples of each code and transcript excerpts follow in Table 2.

The credibility of the study was assured through the involvement of Author 2 in the role of a critical friend (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009) and peer reviewer (Creswell, 2009). This peer debriefing involved the challenge to explain and justify the methods, processes, evidence, and conclusions along the timeline of the research (Mertens, 2010). Additionally, member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation (Birt *et al.*, 2016), was utilised. First, an informal verbal summary of the participants' contributions was given at the end of each interview with the participants asked to verify the accuracy of the summation. Formally, transcriptions were provided to willing the participants for the same purpose, with the option of clarifying or modifying their responses in ways they felt were important. Two out of nine participants volunteered to perform this checking, with one making minimal changes to the spelling of an author's name and the other making no changes.

## Findings

The findings suggest that teachers' ways of using curriculum materials can vary a great deal from teacher to teacher and that there are a number of external or contextual factors that appear as significant to their engagement with the curriculum. Four

Table 2. Examples of codes and transcript excerpts

Transcript excerpt	Coded
... looking at things like the C2C units and pulling out the good stuff from that or using that but then modifying it to meet our contexts of our school	Use of additional resources (C2C)
I've had professional development in it. I don't know if it was great professional development at the time looking back now ... I'd say I've been exposed to ... the layout and the positioning of the Australian curriculum as a whole. I don't think I've had any experiences where we've gotten that [English curriculum] focus	Professional development (Australian Curriculum as a whole, not English)
We have spent a bit of time going back over it [the curriculum] and particularly when it comes to lining up units and that type of thing. In this setting, that's quite important because you have to mix a few things together and really find out what it is they [the students] need to be able to know and do. You do find yourself going back to [the curriculum] a bit'	Use of curriculum prompted by leadership role (Principal)
My school ... has been fairly focused on maths as an outcome. So, all of their [professional development] and all of their strategic plan is focused around maths improvement	School prioritisation (of another curriculum area)

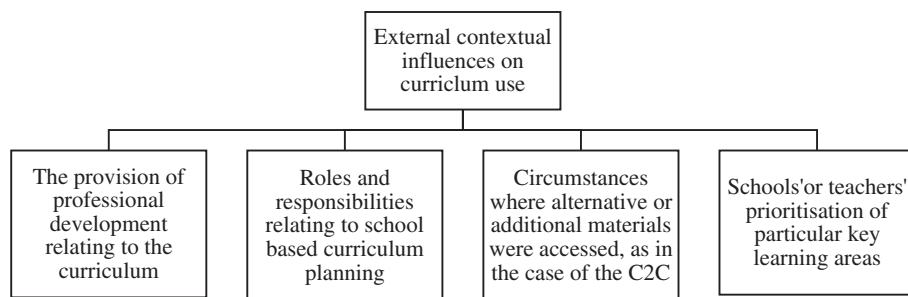


Figure 2. External contextual influences on curriculum use

external contextual influences (as shown in Figure 2) were revealed by the analysis of the interview data. The factors are: the provision of professional development relating to the curriculum; roles and responsibilities relating to school-based curriculum planning; circumstances where alternative or additional materials were accessed, as in the case of the C2C; and schools' prioritisation of particular learning areas. Each factor will now be explored.

### *The provision of professional development*

The provision of professional development relating to the Curriculum, or lack thereof, was one factor influencing each teachers' use of the AC:E in our study.



Many comments appeared to demonstrate a link between a lack of professional development and those teachers' self-reported limited use of the intended curriculum. Freya, Ellen, and Ian all reported receiving no professional development in the AC:E and each described a seeming lack of familiarity with the AC:E. However, the relationships were complex. Ellen stated that her school's planning was based on the Australian Curriculum, although she also reflected that, 'To be honest I can't particularly pinpoint which bits are literature, which bits are language—all the different components, but we definitely use all of it'.

Of the other teachers in the study, Denise believed that she had some professional development when the English curriculum was first introduced, but that this professional development was conducted by school-based personnel and she did not recall what content or skills were covered. Henry, whose interview demonstrated his use of the curriculum being greater than most of the other teachers, stated that he had accessed professional development but was unsure how helpful this activity had been in familiarising him with the Curriculum. His experiences in professional development had been directed at 'the layout and the positioning of the Australian Curriculum as a whole' rather than giving particular attention to the English curriculum. He confirmed, 'I don't think I've had any experiences where we've gotten that focus'.

Annie's familiarity and use of the Curriculum did seem based on the provision of professional development in her school, as she recalled beginning to work with the curriculum in its earliest iterations:

*Our school runs really great professional development, so we were on board straight away in terms of playing around with it. I've been implementing the Australian Curriculum across all three strands [literacy, language, literature] ... planning, teaching, assessing, reporting, feedback, monitoring ... using the Australian Curriculum for years.*

Additionally, Annie commented that although the staff at her school are widely varied in their experience, 'the great professional communities and learning communities' in her school have had a great effect in communicating the curriculum content and supporting implementation.

The role of teachers' professional development in school reform has been the focus on many studies over the past decade (see; Meirink *et al.*, 2010; Imants *et al.*, 2013). Professional development, known as those processes and activities intended to improve teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes, has been shown to improve student learning (Guskey, 2002). Notably, without familiarity with the curriculum the teachers' fidelity of implementation and the degree to which they adhered to guidelines and content could be placed at risk. This is supported by the work of researchers such as Dane and Schneider (1998) who highlighted the importance of maintaining integrity in order for teachers to provide their students with optimal curriculum learning experiences. A lack of integrity between the intended curriculum, the implementation, or the teachers' adaptations of materials could be incongruent with the developers' goals and principles (LeMahieu, 2011). As such, the fidelity of many the teachers' alignment with the AC:E is highly unlikely based on their self-reported levels of unfamiliarity with the structure and content of the curriculum.

*Curriculum roles and leadership*

Although acknowledgement was made of the Curriculum appearing in the state level, school level, and even individual planning documentation, for most of the teachers, their familiarisation and individual use of the curriculum content did not appear as a priority. Exceptions to this were found those teachers with curriculum leadership roles within schools, or those who were tasked with responsibilities in the preparation of school-based English curriculum documentation. For these teachers, the contextual demands seemed to have played a part in their familiarity and use of the curriculum, an idea supported in previous research (see Fullan, 2007).

A greater level of familiarity and enactment of the curriculum could be ascribed to teachers Beatrice and Henry. Beatrice, who was involved in curriculum development in her school, reported that she ‘did a stint as the HOC [Head of Curriculum] and I had to develop a lot of stuff around curriculum’. Beatrice described herself as ‘having a good handle on [the AC:E]’ as she used a school-based program incorporating both the AC:E and a school-developed scope and sequence of learning. Henry, as the teaching principal in a remote Indigenous school, spent time aligning curriculum and assessment and he confirmed that, ‘there’s a big emphasis within our region at the moment on linking the Australian Curriculum content descriptor to your criteria and your assessment’. This use of the curriculum as an auditing tool and in planning seems to have resulted in Henry becoming quite conversant with the curriculum itself. He agreed, stating that, ‘In this setting, that’s quite important because you have to mix a few things together and really find out what it is they [the students] need to be able to know and do. You do find yourself going back to [the curriculum] a bit’. These two teachers appear to have had a greater level of familiarity with the curriculum because of the demands of leadership roles that prescribed interaction with the AC:E.

Ian’s interest in Mathematics, as well as his nomination by school administration as responsible for the production of year level Mathematics planning, meant that he was not expected to be involved in accessing the AC:E. His role demanded the planning of Mathematics for all the other Year 6 teachers, while another teacher was responsible for the planning of English. He explained, ‘I’ve kind of been pushed into ‘You’re the maths person’, and then we’ve got someone to do Science, we’ve got someone to do English and someone to do History ... we are responsible for those different key learning areas’. Ian elaborated that, ‘We write the units and then we package that together and go “Well, this is what needs to be covered.”’ This role meant that planning for English was given to Ian by the teacher who ‘did the English’ and that ‘... the ACARA documents [for English] ... I don’t really see them’. Ian’s context seems to be one of the well-delineated responsibilities in terms of accessing and using particular parts of the curriculum, despite the teachers being responsible for teaching all the key learning areas. This was demonstrated in his admission that despite the opportunity to access the AC:E if he wanted, ‘I don’t really need to because someone else has done that for me’. It is perhaps not surprising that the allocation of planning roles and responsibilities, strictly adhered to in this school’s context, necessitated Ian’s prioritisation of Mathematics and subsequently limited the demand he felt for increasing his familiarity with the AC:E.

*Use of alternative or additional materials*

Many of the teachers in our study used what might be considered as alternate or additional materials as the primary sources of curriculum, in place of the AC:E. For example, although they were asked directly about the AC:E, Claire, Gillian and Denise, all teachers from Queensland schools, instead made reference to their use of C2C (the Curriculum 2 Classroom materials developed by the Education Department in this state). Their comments and their admissions of unfamiliarity with the AC:E itself could mean that they considered the C2C materials as valid replacements or alternatives for the intended curriculum.. Claire's school was using the C2C and she relayed the school's reliance on its inclusion with dissatisfaction stating that, 'with C2C coming in, you're pretty well told what to do now ... I know in our school we are'. However, at the time of interview, Claire attested that her use of the AC:E was confined to 'skimming' the documents and instead of using the C2C materials. Denise confirmed that her use of the curriculum consisted of 'highlighting things to be asked about'. She identified the use of C2C as a school initiative but added that in her school, teachers were 'doing a mixture of C2C with our own twist'.

Gillian stated that she 'worked with' the AC:E in the context of her position teaching in Distance Education. Describing the use of the C2C in her context, Gillian stated, 'We weren't given much choice in what we had to teach. It was the C2C down to the letter basically because the parents got their pack ... they took the pack home ... with all the lessons in it'. However, she recognised that some adaptations were required and reflected that, '... we would pull it apart and look at the holes ... or things that we'd think 'Oh, parents might find that a bit difficult to teach,' then we created our on-air lessons to support the students from there'. With no self-reported use of the AC:E curriculum itself, Gillian's implementation of the curriculum seemed to be wholly directed by this secondary source.

As a teacher in Queensland, Beatrice had access to the prepared curriculum documents known as the C2C but said that in her classroom she was using a school-based program that drew on the AC:E as well as the C2C documents. Clarifying, she added, 'We didn't really enjoy [the C2C] very much so whilst we use a lot of the texts that they provide, because they are really rich texts, we may teach them in a different way to what C2C says'. She recounted the school's use of the AC:E as a 'base' and, 'then we brought in all of our own things ... the things that we'd already done at [our school] ... we have aligned those two together so that we've come up with our own scope and sequence'. Beatrice's comments seem to attest to a degree of acceptance and familiarity with the curriculum and a level of understanding of how to modify it to suit her particular context, albeit through an amalgamation of ideas as an interpretation of the curriculum.

For many of the teachers in Queensland, the C2C played a significant role in accounts of their use of the intended curriculum. Teachers' engagement with the C2C has been 'characterised by competing pressures and priorities which supported a more prescriptive approach to the enactment of the very detailed C2C', according to Hardy (2015, p. 75), who found a number of school literacy leaders who reported first being told to follow the C2C prescriptively only to be later advised that it should only be used as a resource to support the curriculum. These competing messages

about the role of the C2C are evident in the responses of the teachers in our study. Some were directed to follow the lessons without change, while others were actively modifying the documents for their school's context. For the Queensland teachers in the study, this meant that the C2C could have been seen as a requirement, an addition, or an alternative for their use of the intended curriculum documents.

Previous research into curriculum implementation details that significant problems can result when teachers do not apply or are unfamiliar with intended curriculum materials. For example, in their studies of teachers piloting new materials, Lloyd (1999) and Collopy (2003) found tremendous variation in the ways the teachers read, interpreted and used curriculum materials. Curriculum materials and knowledge about curricular purposes and structures are seen as two of the most valuable tools teachers can draw upon to organise instruction and facilitate student learning (Shulman, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 2005).

### *Schools' prioritisation of key learning areas*

The fourth factor related to the prioritisation of subject area English or other key learning areas by the schools of the teachers. For example, Freya explained that her current context had a whole-school focus on Mathematics and as a result, all professional development has been directed at improving student achievement in this key learning area. Although Freya reported herself to be somewhat familiar with the English curriculum and believed that the school's planning documents were embedded with the AC:E, she had not seen any whole-school English curriculum documents. When recounting her experiences of using AC:E, she described herself as, 'not being au fait' with the documents but that, 'I have looked at it and I understand how the strands work, but I don't know the details of it as such'.

Situational factors such as the school itself have been shown to influence the response to reform (Harris & Burn, 2011). Reform endorsement by school administrators and teachers influences the achievement of new policy goals and their success or failure (Porter, 2013). The local capacity and commitment to implementation that has been described as, 'will and skill', has long informed policy implementation research (McLaughlin, 1987). For some schools, the curriculum may be seen as neglectful of the local context and so generalised that its implementation becomes inapplicable (Pressley *et al.*, 2004). Coburn (2004) also noted that the level of understanding of the curriculum in terms of policy or associated practices was associated with the perceived 'fit' with the needs of their students in the local contexts. This was shown in our study, where school or teacher prioritisation of particular learning areas appeared as a factor of influence.

## **Discussion**

As the ultimate enactors of the curriculum (Porter *et al.*, 2015), teachers' endorsement of the curriculum is known to support reform (Datnow, 2002; Porter, 2013). The majority of teachers in our study acknowledged their relative unfamiliarity with the AC:E and this unfamiliarity could be seen as a lack of teacher endorsement. McLaughlin (1987, p. 172) states that, 'implementation dominates outcomes'

(p. 172) so that variation in implementation is to be expected due to each teacher's individual use of the intended curriculum and the distinctive context addressed by the implementation (McLaughlin, 1987). As such, our study offers both support for previous research and a more descriptive indication of the external contextual influences on teachers' use of the new curriculum. The viewpoint that policy is re-imagined at the 'street' level, by teachers themselves (McLaughlin, 1987; Coburn, 2004), was supported by our study, along with the finding that there exist complex contextual influences on primary teachers' use of new curriculum in Australia. With the implementation of the curriculum in Australia described as being 'narrowly proscribed by existing structures, resources and traditions' (MacDonald, 2003, p. 139) these contextual factors require new consideration. The well-held belief that any curriculum reform should include teachers from the onset, rather than particularising content at the end of reform (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Fullan, 2016), appears to have validity in our study, but with attention drawn to external contextual influences as well as previously evidenced internal teacher variables.

In contrast to studies such as Lieber *et al.* (2009, p. 477), where factors influencing the implementation of a new curriculum appeared to be mostly related to 'teacher variables' such as their reservations, expectations, backgrounds, experience, knowledge, biases and motivation, the teachers in our study identified external factors as those significant to their engagement with the curriculum. The contextual peculiarities appeared to have influence on their self-reported levels of familiarity and use of the AC:E. Some of these external contextual activities worked in support of familiarising the teachers with the curriculum, while others did not. Of particular interest was the finding that some of the influences worked in opposition for different teachers. For example, the contextual considerations of curriculum roles and responsibilities worked to familiarise some teachers with the AC:E, while not providing opportunities for others. Additionally, although it appeared that having a role in curriculum planning was imperative to the level of familiarity with the AC:E, for many of our participants, the role of 'classroom teacher' did not seem to necessitate familiarisation with the curriculum.

The findings propose four significant factors that have influenced these teachers' use of the AC:E. Drawing on the four influences, we put forth the following considerations for stakeholders in curriculum reform. First, curriculum developers must recognise that the provision of professional development relating to the curriculum appears to influence teachers' use of the curriculum and that the roles and responsibilities that teachers hold within their schools can work for and against their level of familiarity and use of the intended curriculum. Furthermore, teachers themselves must consider how the use of alternative or additional materials, as in the case of the C2C, may not support the fidelity of the intended curriculum, whether this is their intent or not. Teacher educators may also play a role in this, assisting preservice teachers to analyse and audit supplementary materials to judge fidelity in the same way. Schools and teachers must be considerate of any implications of the prioritisation of particular learning areas may have, as for teachers to take ownership and be more likely to form the desire to enact the new curriculum, they must be involved in the process (Berlach, 2010).



The teachers in our study reflected the complexity of the relationship between external contextual peculiarities. Most notably, the teachers who were in educational contexts where their interaction with the curriculum was encouraged, appeared to have a greater level of familiarity. This difference may not be surprising when considering that opportunities for the obstruction or support of reform are attributed to a school's culture and specifically the provision of roles for teachers (Fullan, 2007). These findings also serve to reveal new perspectives in Australian primary teachers' use of the AC:E, while tentatively suggesting considerations that could inform subsequent implementations of curricula in Australia and elsewhere. However, an important acknowledgement remains that additional research into primary teachers' classroom practices is needed in order to judge whether their actual enactment of the curriculum aligns with the aims of curriculum designers. We also acknowledge that a significant limitation of our study was the idiographic sample size, while reiterating that the nature of case study research recommends measured acceptance of any findings as generalisations beyond our sample (Thomas, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The teachers' self-reported use and familiarity with the curriculum itself demand recognition of potential difficulties in their enactment of what Shulman called the 'tools of teaching' (1986, p. 10). As the success of curriculum reform is known to be affected by certain barriers and constraints (März & Kelchtermans, 2013), the results of our study deemed that a number of external contextual factors were influential in a number of aspects of teachers' knowledge. Teachers' knowledge of educational contexts is generally seen as being substantive, having influence over teaching performance (Shulman, 1986). As such, our study identified four separate external contextual influences that dominated these Australian primary teachers' familiarity and use of the AC:E. These were: the provision of professional development relating to the curriculum, their roles and responsibilities relating to school-based curriculum planning, circumstances where alternative or additional curriculum materials were accessed and the prioritisation of particular key learning areas over English, with implementation of the curriculum itself.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## **Geolocation**

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## **Data availability statement**

There is no data set available with this research.



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