

## Curriculum verses pedagogy: Does it have to be?

### Introduction - the issues

Just a couple of years ago, the Australian curriculum was endorsed for implementation and already NSW is having a curriculum review. There are many reasons for a review including:

- inadequacies within the Australian curriculum;
- the concerns of teachers about overcrowding in the curriculum;
- the effects of prescribed curriculum on pedagogy;
- the excessive focus on NAPLAN tests and the skewing of both the curriculum and pedagogy to meet community expectations about improving standards in literacy and numeracy;
- the data from international testing instruments showing that Australian schools are falling behind other nations.

While these are the drivers of review, it is important to look at some other factors that will affect the final outcome.

### Beliefs

In reviewing the curriculum, NSW is considering alternatives, but I suspect not too closely. There are some strong long held beliefs by key participants that underlie the state curriculum including:

- A curriculum guarantee - the government needs to assure community about what is taught in schools
- Discipline studies are best to deliver a guarantee about what is taught in school
- Pedagogy is a matter for school systems and teachers not curriculum authorities
- High stake assessment provides a control over curriculum implementation.

Constructing a new curriculum which loosens the hold of these beliefs will be a challenge - the greatest of which will be any agreement by school systems to allow pedagogy to be prescribed. It is accepted that what students need is a competent and inspiring teacher who will stretch them to achieve their best. This “best” might be a highly prescribed curriculum, but it needn’t be. Therein lies the challenge of embracing the nexus between curriculum and pedagogy, of having the best of both worlds.

As Christians, we have a view about the goals of education - to know Christ and not only know about him. Our learning about God is linked to a belief in the importance of all subjects to reveal the nature of God, not only general religious education and special religious education. The content of the curriculum is important, but so is how students learn, their individual gifts and talents, the need for opportunities for increasing specialisation (depth) as well as a curriculum guarantee (breadth), and how relationships between teachers and students mirror our relationship with God. What pedagogy can demonstrate to students is that we care for them because God loves them. Perhaps the separation of curriculum and pedagogy has impeded learning.

## Some extremes

To focus on the issues, a comment on two extremes is helpful.

### The Blue Book

I have never seen this document, but many older primary teachers who were teaching in the 1950s tell me that it was all you needed. It set out the curriculum and the pedagogy for every lesson throughout the year in every subject - including moral and religious education. The ultimate teaching example of *Simon says*, a chance for total obedience to the prescribed curriculum and equality of presentation for all - except, no two teachers are exactly the same and neither do their students have the same needs nor do they learn at the same rate. However, there was many a primary teacher of the eighties and nineties that lamented the curriculum and lesson preparation demands on them and longed for the Blue Book and its security.

### Summerhill School

This school is an independent British boarding school that was founded in 1921 by Alexander Sutherland Neill with the belief that the school should be made to fit the child. It is run as a democratic community; the running of the school is conducted in the school meetings, which anyone, staff or pupil, may attend, and at which everyone has an equal vote. Members of the community are free to do as they please, so long as their actions do not cause any harm to others, according to Neill's principle "Freedom, not Licence." This extends to the freedom for pupils to choose which lessons, if any, they attend. The full inspection on 5 October 2011 concluded that the school is outstanding in all areas except teaching, which was seen as good, and not outstanding due to issues of assessment.

Even in this example of freedom, the issues of pedagogy and standards loom large notwithstanding the complexity of students not being required to attend any lesson.

## Problems in finding common ground

The above extremes point clearly to something in between, but finding common ground is problematic. As well as the differing beliefs about curriculum and pedagogy listed above there are practicalities:

### School buildings

There is a huge capital commitment in school buildings. Pre World War II designs were duplicated to meet the expanding need to accommodate the baby boomers in the 1950s. Schools are established around a series of individual classrooms to fit fifty, now twenty to thirty, students. Yes, libraries, gyms, specialist rooms and covered areas have been added, but the basic teaching unit is the classroom which with near maximum numbers is inflexible and dictates pedagogy. While the design of primary classrooms provides more flexibility with smaller furniture, the basic secondary classroom for the majority of subjects is unchanged from the fifties. Technology can hold hope for changed pedagogy but has not always helped - boring lessons using overheads or white-boards, or smart boards are still boring.

The inflexibility of school spaces continues to dictate pedagogy and make innovation difficult, costly and time-consuming. There is no point in the NSW curriculum requiring facilities that don't exist. The capital expenditure is unimaginable. How does this restriction affect curriculum development?

Still, some schools have been experimenting with different arrangements. In the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta open space learning has been implemented where a year group of sometimes four classes has occupied a space with four teachers. Finding

the space has not been easy and when identified, can be no more than a traditional classroom only bigger. One teacher directs the lesson and provides the input while the other teachers assist students usually working on a task in groups. There is a lot of evidence about the effectiveness of carefully constructed tasks and group work. However, this arrangement requires teachers who have been well trained in this methodology, especially task construction, and students who have been similarly trained in working together. Take away both and you find that only the better students learn as they exclude those who either disrupt or can not keep up. Teachers invariably find themselves involved in discipline, trying to keep the other students on task. There needs to be careful evaluation of both the administration, training of teachers and students, learning processes, tracking student progress and student learning outcomes to ensure that this experiment is worthwhile.

#### Teacher training

For seemingly ever, the orthodoxy has been that teachers teach like they have been taught. If there is any truth in this statement than the implications for new ways of teaching are depressing. Most teachers are resistant to change believing that if they wait long enough innovations in curriculum and pedagogy will go away and, on the whole, they have been right.

Teacher education programs are often innovative and trainees enthusiastic, but when they take up an appointment, they find that preparation is excessive and that in secondary schools the number of different classes to be taught and in primary schools the number of KLAs to be taught impose an extraordinary demand. To cope, simple teaching pedagogy, often teacher centred, dominates.

The implications here are that any new curriculum which includes some provisions/requirements for changed pedagogy will need substantial training support which is ongoing and long-term.

#### High stakes assessment

Assessment of student achievement and feedback to students are basic to teaching. However, our system has developed an unhealthy and unhelpful attitude to assessment. Driven by NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate schools are given feedback on student performance. Because of the high stakes nature of these examinations, covering the curriculum or, in the case of NAPLAN narrowing it to literacy and numeracy, has supported pedagogy that is teacher centred and very directive to achieve the best results. Yet, in international comparisons such methods have been seen to be ineffective. There can be no curriculum review without a review of the place of external assessment so that testing supports learning rather than driving a narrow teacher directed pedagogy for limited outcomes.

#### School system autonomy

For the Board of Studies and today's curriculum authority the NSW Education Standards Authority, how the curriculum is taught is a matter for systems and teachers, not the curriculum authority. Is this still appropriate?

The NSW curriculum review will have representatives from the school systems among the stakeholders that will make recommendations. However, the curriculum needs to be constructed in partnership with, not representation by, the school systems with appropriate consultation with other stakeholders. This change in development process will help a move away from a top-down prescriptive models of curriculum that stretch

teachers to cover in the time available and force teacher directed pedagogy. The degree of change to the curriculum and its pedagogical implementation will depend on what the systems will agree to. Forcing them to work more closely with the curriculum authority might be one way of generating genuine change. Then, as was the case with the implementation of the new HSC in 1997, cross sector professional training to encourage new pedagogic requirements that are imbedded in a different curriculum.

### Multidiscipline

Progressive educationalists have always favoured multidiscipline studies because they can deliver multiple outcomes. In NSW primary schools there has been implementation of the Coordinated Outcomes Groups (COGS) for primary schools, where a focus subject carries the COG but includes, as appropriate, other subject outcomes and content. This has been difficult to achieve in secondary schools where the focus has been on subjects and their integrity. Subjects with the “studies” label have been both looked down on by the pure disciplines and sometimes discarded, yet they hold potential learning that is not available through disciplines. What is the place for multidiscipline studies in a new curriculum to break down both, the hold the disciplines have on curriculum and the concept of KLA silos?

### **Moving forward**

So, what are the possible models for curriculum? A great deal depends on the level of prescription and not only in curriculum.

Highly prescriptive models could outline the content for each subject in each stage of learning and the appropriate pedagogy for each subject. The current testing programs could support it. Non-prescriptive models could provide a bare essential content with no prescription about pedagogy and no external testing.

But somewhere in between there must be middle ground. Such a position would:

1. provide a minimum, not maximum, guarantee to the community about what is being taught in schools in terms of outcomes and subject matter,
2. rely on reporting individual achievement against standards,
3. include for primary schools a pedagogy based on multidiscipline tasks that can be done mainly through group work and in secondary schools a pedagogy of discipline and multidiscipline tasks as appropriate.

The construction of tasks would be cooperative between the school systems and the curriculum authority but integral to the new curriculum which would mean that final responsibility would be with the curriculum authority to ensure quality and equity of access.

In the past teachers have been resistant to new curriculum. Establishing mechanisms to share the development responsibility where systems and teachers have more say in the final product may result in greater acceptance and actual implementation.

This is one possible framework to break the current mould and one that is worthy of attention if the benefits of the nexus between curriculum and pedagogy is to be exploited for improved learning.

John Gore

## Helpful Grammar Resources

Do you know only a bit about grammar and have difficulty teaching it?

Do you just teach grammar incidentally, as things arise?

Did you know that NSW Department of Education teachers are required to teach grammar?



□ **Now available** from the TCF office ..... sequential GRAMMAR activities, including definitions and examples, covering each of the teaching points for Early Stage 1, Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the *NSW Education Standards Authority English Syllabus* as of July 2018.

These free lesson guides are available, in electronic form only, by sending an email request to [tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au](mailto:tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au) specifying the stages you require.

## Diary dates for 2019

Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> June at 1.30pm: AGM at 21/16 Bobart St, Parramatta. (Enter from King St).

11<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> October: Weekend *Getaway* at Stanwell Tops. Details in next *TCF News*.

## Notice of TCF Annual General Meeting

Saturday 15th June 2019 at 1.30pm

at Unit 21/16 Bobart St Parramatta. (Entrance in King St)

1. Welcome
2. Apology / Proxy
3. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held 19<sup>th</sup> May 2018 to be accepted.
4. Matters arising:
5. Reports from Committee.
6. Appointment of Auditor.
7. Appointment of Public Officer.
8. Election of Committee - President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Committee members.
9. General Business.
10. Closing Prayer.

Contact Pam (0490 148 249) if you require directions or transport assistance.

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