Creating an Australian Curriculum for English: national agendas, local contexts

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Creating an Australian curriculum for English: National agendas, local contexts

Brenton Doecke, Graham Parr, Wayne Sawyer (Eds.)

The Australian Curriculum: English is soon to be implemented in schools around the country. Many claims have been made about the value of a national curriculum especially to do with ‘nation building’, ‘internationalisation’ and ‘the knowledge and skills necessary for young people to participate in a 21st century economy’.

This book looks beyond this language in order to raise important questions about the implementation of The Australian Curriculum: English. Our aim is to inquire into the claims made on behalf of this curriculum through critical accounts generated by people working within a range of educational sectors and jurisdictions across the country. All three of us have been involved in the official consultation process conducted by The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) at various stages in the development of the new curriculum, as have other contributors to this volume. We have also been involved in ongoing conversations with teachers, educators and researchers across the country and internationally about traditions and recent developments in English language curriculum. It seems fair to say that many aspects of The Australian Curriculum: English, such as the tripartite division into Language, Literature and Literacy (despite continued disquiet about this structural issue from key experts, including members of the English teacher associations) have been delivered by ACARA as a fait accompli. However, leaving aside the management of the official consultation processes, the interactions that we have had with others in the course of coming together to talk about each iteration of the curriculum, both at ACARA forums and in other networks and gatherings, have generated a host of questions that prompted us to produce this book.

Key questions posed by this book are:

- How can The Australian Curriculum be implemented in a principled, ethical, research-informed way for the benefit of all Australian students?
- How are teachers, teacher educators and professional groups across the country anticipating, engaging with and planning for the new curriculum? What are some of the likely tensions between the intended curriculum, as outlined in existing ACARA documentation, and the enacted one? How will it connect with the lived experience of teachers and students in Australian schools?
- What challenges does it pose for developing and implementing curriculum at a school and classroom level? How might the three strands – Language, Literature, Literacy – be integrated in a meaningful way? How will educators be able to ensure that young people in schools engage with the curriculum on terms that are relevant to them?

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- What challenges does it pose for developing and implementing curriculum at a school and classroom level? How might the three strands – Language, Literature, Literacy – be integrated in a meaningful way? How will educators be able to ensure that young people in schools engage with the curriculum on terms that are relevant to them?
— How might a single national curriculum that privileges the use of ‘Standard Australian English’ meet the particular needs of Australian students within diverse communities? Is such a curriculum really able to provide young people with a range of pathways into continuing education and productive employment?

— How does the new national English curriculum, as it is being read, interpreted and created by English teachers and educators across the country, compare with existing state-based curricula? What might be gained with the introduction of the new curriculum? What might be lost?

The book identifies silences within The Australian Curriculum: English, especially questions about its implementation. In doing so it seeks to productively engage with issues that are already emerging, and others that are likely to emerge, as systems and schools implement the curriculum. Clearly, the authors in the book are coming to these issues from different settings and local contexts, but they share a common belief that the historical moment of this national curriculum represents a valuable opportunity for re-envisioning curriculum as something that teachers and their students create within their local school communities. We hang on to this hope, that the implementation of the curriculum will be an opportunity for Australian English teachers to show once again the kind of creativity and commitment that have earned them the respect of literacy educators around the world. This is despite the fact that the pressures towards standardisation, as distinct from aspiring to standards that truly reflect the best knowledge and experience about English curriculum available, seem very strong.

Many of the chapters have been authored or coauthored by practising teachers, who draw on their immense experience to reflect on the complexities of developing and implementing curriculum. Through their writing they affirm the importance of teachers continuing to engage in reflective practice at this important time in Australia’s history. Any new curriculum should, amongst other things, prompt practitioners to reflect on the difference between the intended curriculum and the enacted one, to see in this difference a focus for continuing inquiry that strives to be fully responsive to the young people in their classrooms. Those young people are much more than empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge and skills that comprise the outcomes statements that have come to typify curriculum documents over the past two decades. They bring into the classroom worlds of language and experience that constitute both a focus for inquiry and a rich resource for making meaning. The Australian Curriculum: English will ultimately be judged according to its capacity to provide a framework in which teachers and students everywhere are able to explore the possibilities of language and the other semiotic resources available to them within their local communities – a project of capacity building (to borrow a neo-liberal term) that is at the heart of schooling for a democratic society. We mean not only a capacity to participate in the economy, important though it might be to equip young people with the skills necessary to obtain a place in the workforce, but also a capacity to use language to grapple with the complexities of experience, to be sensitive to the interface between language and meaning, to be responsive to the languages and cultures of others.

Does The Australian Curriculum: English adequately recognise teachers and students as active participants in the development and implementation of curriculum? The answer to this question cannot be found simply in the text of the curriculum itself, though several of the chapters focus on the language it uses, raising questions about its capacity to be appropriated and transformed into a living document that might support the kind of inquiry into language and meaning that is a feature of the
best English classrooms. So much depends on the support and resources that are provided for the curriculum's implementation, and on whether teachers are able to carve out an intellectual space that allows them to reflect on what the curriculum actually means in practice in terms of the espoused national agenda and their particular local context. Teachers need that space to reflect collaboratively and purposefully on crucial questions such as: Whose interests does this curriculum actually serve? Whose language and culture is being privileged? How might we address that issue? What opportunities does it provide for us to be ethically responsive to the languages and dialects of young people for whom Standard Australian English is something strange or alien?

We hope that this book will be seen as reflecting the first wave of such thinking, and that it will be taken up and read by teachers around Australia, who will themselves be critically interrogating the curriculum even as they implement it.
Chapter One

The new curriculum for English in Australia and student achievement under the old curriculum: understanding inequality and addressing it

Richard Teese

The new Australian Curriculum: English offers a chance to transform the educational experience of a great many children who currently struggle, fall behind, lose interest and leave school unfulfilled. We have not made good the promise of the old curriculum to engage all learners and to enrich them with skills, insights, feelings and values.

That the old curriculum with which we still work differs from one State and Territory to another hardly compares with how, in a systematic way, children across the country differ from one family background to another as if there were only one jurisdiction—that of the subject, English, a distinct strand of our institutionalised culture, sovereign in all States and Territories and indivisible.

If there were any doubt about the power of English—diverse and democratic as it appears—to ‘sort out’ the population academically, we have only to contemplate the sharp and persistent social patterns that the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) produces every year. NAPLAN represents only a narrow spectrum of the learning objectives that a teacher of English addresses, and if there are large social gaps even on these limited measures, it would be reasonable to expect still bigger gaps in learning objects that are more complex (and inaccessible to the narrow instructional preparation associated with ‘high stakes’ testing in the United States). Social gaps in examination results—which reflect the more complex demands of English in secondary school—are as marked and predictable as the social divide in NAPLAN. But how are these patterns produced and why are they persistent? And can The Australian Curriculum: English fulfil the promise of inclusion that the old curriculum of the States and Territories failed to fulfil?

In this paper, I review the evidence of unequal achievement in English and map the social gaps in achievement as they arise at different stages of schooling. My purpose is to highlight the challenges which the new curriculum faces and to argue for changes in policy to enable teachers and students to take full advantage of The Australian Curriculum: English.

The early manifestations of unequal achievement

The challenge for teachers of English begins early, before a child enters school. Before two years of age, social differences in speech development are relatively small. But by age 4, they are quite marked, almost as if timed to coincide with entry to pre-school and the first tests of sociability (Reilly et al., 2010).

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These differences are not accidental. Educated parents are models of schooled speech. The emphasis in speech development is not only on correctness in the choice and combination of words, but in the style of speech and its personal and social impact. Speech is a process of self-imaging. We see ourselves reflected in the way we speak, and we seek to project ourselves as well as control how we are understood through our choice of words and the tone we employ.

More rapid cognitive growth and social development promoted through the style, intensity and content of language training in educated homes are rewarded by earlier and smoother integration into the environment of school. By the time children sit their first NAPLAN tests in Year 3, a substantial gap exists between those whose parents are well-educated and prosperous and those whose parents are poorly educated and economically insecure. Children from the poorest backgrounds are more than four times as likely to be poor readers, while children from the most advantaged backgrounds are more than three times as likely to be advanced readers.

Figure 1 displays the reading profiles of Year 3 students in different bands of SES (based on unpublished data for Victoria). The chart shows how low achievement progressively contracts as we move up the social scale and how, on the other hand, high achievement progressively increases. Conversely, the further down the social scale, the greater the incidence of low achievement and the smaller the proportion of Year 3 children reading at an advanced level.

Multiplying advantage and disadvantage through segregated settings

Children bring their individual advantages or disadvantages to school, where these are pooled and where the effects are multiplied. Thus in schools with a very high concentration of children from poor families, about 18 in 100 Year 3 students fail to reach national minimum standards, while in schools with a very low concentration of such children, only between 3 and 5 in 100 fail to reach national minimum standards (see Figure 2).
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Figure 2 shows that as the level of concentration of low SES children in a school increases, so too does the proportion of children who are poor readers or who are reaching national minimum standards only.
The widening social gap in achievement across stages of schooling

Starting from a lower base, children from working-class families remain approximately two years behind the reading level of children from upper middle-class families (as measured by the educational level of parents) (see NAPLAN, 2009; tables for 2010 are incomplete). A gap, already wide in Year 3, continues to widen. We can show this by comparing the average reading scores of schools whose ICSEA rank places them in the highest quintile of SES and the average scores of schools placed in the lowest fifth of SES.

Figure 3 reports reading scores for schools across Australia at highest and lowest SES extremes. Students in the highest SES schools reach the reading level of students in the lowest SES schools around two years earlier. For example, the Year 5 reading average in the lowest SES schools (i.e. 436 scale points) is reached in the highest SES schools in Year 3 (452). Similarly, the Year 7 reading average in the lowest SES schools (495) is reached by schools in the highest SES band in Year 5 (524). Finally, while in the lowest SES schools a score of 521 is reached in Year 9, students in the highest SES schools reach this level and exceed it considerably in Year 7 (581).

Figure 3: The two-year gap in reading scores by educational level of parents

Average scores in reading

Not only does it take an additional two years of schooling for children in the poorest schools to reach the reading level of children in the most advantaged schools, but also the margin that separates them grows larger and larger across stages of schooling because students in the lowest SES schools make up less and less ground. Schooling becomes less and less effective in bringing students in the poorest schools up to the standard reached by students in the highest SES schools. It takes an extra two years for children in the poorest schools to catch up, and even then they do not catch up completely, as

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