



The curriculum conversation in Australia

Review Essay of *The Australian Curriculum: promises, problems and possibilities*, ed. Alan Reid and Deborah Price (ACSA, Canberra 2018).

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Received: 22 July 2018 / Accepted: 3 August 2018 / Published online: 27 August 2018
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Abstract

This essay discusses a new book on the Australian Curriculum (AC), edited by Alan Reid and Deborah Price. The book included twenty-one different perspectives on the Australian Curriculum, including chapters on its various learning areas and its other cross-curriculum elements; chapters on its context and its political implications; and chapters assessing its adequacy in terms of various kinds of diversity and inclusiveness. The essay discusses the value and the difficulty of bringing together these different kinds of perspectives. It reflects on what they represent as an insight into the current forms of Australian curriculum inquiry. More broadly, it draws attention to questions of education purposes in a democracy; and of the complexity of interactions between national frameworks such as the AC; political purposes; and educational practices within schools. The conversation about whether a national framework is valuable is necessarily intertwined with issues concerning the kind of framework that is specified (its starting points and degree of specification), and the processes and resource support associated with it.

Keywords Curriculum · Curriculum policy · Australia

Introduction

The moves associated with the development of an ‘Australian Curriculum’ have been unprecedented in Australia’s history, and the processes involved have produced unprecedented opportunities for debates and position-taking in Australia on curriculum for the twenty-first century. The multi-staged writing of ‘shape’ papers, the online public website, the many consultations, the much debated Donnelly and Wiltshire (2014) review before the curriculum was actually enacted, and the more recent individual decisions of states about when and how to adapt and enact the national framework have all attracted scrutiny and responses from teachers and their professional associations, from academics, from media and from at least some parts of the general public. Internationally, the question of how to rethink school curriculum in the context of the twenty-first century has been occupying much band-width. Governments, private

corporations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and curriculum theorists around the world have all had their say. The Australian Curriculum’s matrix structure: combining ‘learning areas’ (or subject-based forms of knowledge); general capabilities; and ‘cross-curriculum priorities’ was one way of bringing together some of the different ways of thinking about what school curriculum should represent, and what elements are important today. Some have clearly preferred different foundations, or see problems of over-complexity with the matrix resolution. In relation to power, governance and who should decide curriculum, the move to the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) has also been the subject of much discussion. So the *Australian Curriculum* marked a point at which decisions were taken that it was time to ‘do’ curriculum in a new way. It was a point that forced many of us to confront again what we think about curriculum as substance and as process, and what we think about the purposes of education in Australia today.

Alan Reid, Deborah Price and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) have made a major contribution to the Australian curriculum scene in producing a new book, *The Australian Curriculum: promises, problems and possibilities* taking up twenty-one different perspectives on the Australian Curriculum framework and the work of

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ACARA (Reid and Price 2018). It is an outstanding collection. Even though this is essentially a book focused on one particular curriculum step in Australia's history, it offers an interesting window to curriculum as a problem. If Australian universities were ever to take curriculum studies seriously again, this is a book I would recommend that students be encouraged to try to come to grips with, rather than beginning with a textbook of curriculum models or a monograph or handbook illustrating one person's theory. Taken as a whole this kind of collection can provide a much more subtle sense of different kinds of thinking and issues than the models or theories evident in many textbooks.

In some ways the book embodies the impossibility of curriculum (or at least of a curriculum framework) as something that can be immune from criticism or that could simultaneously meet divergent but important claims on curriculum. And in some ways it captures the contemporary curriculum studies field in Australia. Australian writers tend to be highly aware of the policy context and the politics of curriculum and the mechanisms of how policy is being 'done'. But they are also engaged with teachers and their professional associations. And, at the same time, they are active participants in international waves of academic curriculum work and new theories, perspectives and debates. That is not a combination that necessarily characterises curriculum inquiry in other countries. So what to make of all this?

I will begin by talking about the different contributions this book makes and conclude with some more general reflections about curriculum and the curriculum scene in Australia. I was invited to write this review article for *Curriculum Perspectives* but I want to begin by saying that the issue of what is left to say is particularly pertinent, both because of the scope of the collection, and because the book is topped and tailed by two excellent chapters. In the first, Alan Reid provides a nice, succinct record of curriculum from a national perspective in the past half-century and the emergence of the Australian Curriculum framework that would be a good introductory summary for education students of the future. And in an 'epilogue', Bill Green provides his own reflection on the curriculum issues brought into view by the book and pre-empts many points a reviewer might want to make (to quote my own notes when I was reading this, *Bill's final chapter is excellent – doesn't leave me much to say!*) and I will come back to this later.

The book's conversation about the Australian curriculum

One striking element of this collection is its breadth: the different kinds of takes on the Australian Curriculum it includes. The distinction between 'curriculum as plan' and 'enacted curriculum' is a familiar one in the literature, but that only

scratches the surface. There are many different starting points and social and intellectual traditions for thinking about and critiquing curriculum, and one big issue, which this book forces a reader to confront, is how on earth you get both big picture and detail in one frame. I imagine most readers would focus on some chapters of the book relevant to their own interests, and try to get a general sense of the collection overall. Probably very few people would read every chapter of this book in detail – and yet in the life of schools and students, a lot of the devil is in the detail and in what teachers do or what schools fail to do in different areas (Yates 2016).

This book includes chapters that take up and analyse the Australian Curriculum in terms of what it means as a step in the history of Australian curriculum frameworks and curriculum governance; others deal with what the new framework signifies in the context of global concepts of knowledge and education purposes; others again take up the concerns of different disciplinary fields or of new amalgamations of these and what is being done to them in this new framework. Other parts of the book explicate and argue about the meaning and value of some of the new AC agendas – the 'general capabilities', and the 'cross-curriculum priorities'. Yet others reflect on the Australian Curriculum from the perspective of assessment, or integration, or inclusion and diversity (with four different chapters just on different aspects of inclusion and diversity alone). Each chapter is pertinent, and together they form a good record of how different areas are being thought about at a particular point in time; but it is genuinely difficult, I think, to hold these discussions together. The book illustrates once again how it is far easier to make a critique of curriculum or to make a particular claim on it, than to resolve at a national or state level, or within schools, or across schools, what range of things should be done.

The book begins with a section dealing with the coming into being of the Australian Curriculum. The first chapter (by Alan Reid) recounts the agendas surrounding its origins and other elements that could have been part of it but were not. A second chapter (by Angela Scarino) discusses the shape and tacit assumptions of the Australian Curriculum, this time from the perspective of trying to write one part of it. Later in the book, two further 'context' articles are included: one from Glenn Savage who discusses the development of ACARA from the perspective of federalism; and one from Bob Lingard who discusses the move to a national curriculum through the lens of globalization and the reconfiguring of policy flows and sources of authority that are part of this.

Reid's opening chapter gives particular attention to the various preceding projects concerned with building 'national curriculum consistency' in Australia. He discusses projects such as 'Discovering Democracy' and the culture wars that preceded the development of ACARA and continued to thread through the next few years as the government changed and a 'hasty' and clearly tendentious review was commissioned.

Reid's chapter provides a clear and succinct record of events over this period and also sets up an argument about the Australian Curriculum agenda, that its official justifications and foundations are inadequate as rationales. Reid suggests that the national curriculum was justified in terms of three official reasons that were all somewhat extrinsic and weak: the need for uniformity for the children who change states each year; the need to prevent duplication of resources; and as an approach that would produce better outcomes in retention rates and achievements for Australia. He argues:

These reasons are untested. Why should a national curriculum affect the retention rate, any more or less than state or territory curriculum? Does a diversity of curriculum agencies promote locally relevant curriculum responses better than a uniform approach? [...] they do not provide an exciting and futuristic rationale for having a national curriculum in the 21st century rather than a number of state and territory curricula. (p.15)

Quoting Kerry Kennedy (2009, p. 6), Reid argues that curriculum debates are 'not merely academic – they are debates about a nation's soul. About its values. About its beliefs.' In so far as these are explicitly addressed in the Australian Curriculum documents, the point of reference is the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008): producing successful learners, confident individuals, and active and informed citizens. But Reid questions whether the structure and content of the Australian Curriculum do adequately enable these goals, or adequately reflect the changing world. We will come back to this. The chapters that follow, on specific areas of the curriculum, suggest mixed assessments of how well the new frameworks do address these issues and whether it represents a step forward or backwards, but in any case one might question how much any curriculum framework rather than what teachers and schools do produces 'confident individuals'. But Reid's point is that the substantive values here were not really the foundational starting points for the framework but rather those 'inadequate' government-level rationales which were essentially simply about consistency as a goal in itself.

Angela Scarino continues on with a second setting up chapter, this time from the perspective of someone commissioned to write one of the 'shape' papers for the curriculum. From this grounded perspective, Scarino argues that the AC framework had no conceptualisation of learning and that its view of knowledge has too little 'metacognitive awareness' (p. 24). She argues its view of diversity is 'categorical', a bureaucrat's conception of ESL, disability and the like; rather than a view that engages with the different life worlds of the learners. And she argues that it is essentially a bureaucratic and 'means-end' view of curriculum thinking rather than other kinds of thinking about curriculum specification such as Stenhouse's (1975)

view of curriculum as an 'educational proposal' of essential features and principles. A number of these issues are picked up again in various chapters in this collection, and in a more extended reflection by Bill Green in the final epilogue, and I will come back to these later.

In the next section of the book, a series of chapters discuss in turn the eight 'learning areas' or designated school subjects of the curriculum. Often books on curriculum leave subject area perspectives outside the frame, and yet these are not only important in practice, but give a different kind of insight regarding significant traditions of thinking and refinement that are at least potentially pertinent for schools (Parkes 2018). One of the things this section of the book opens up is that the curriculum dynamic (at least in Australia) is not just about changing government-mandated overarching curriculum frameworks about what needs to be emphasized or de-emphasized or passed on. In addition, as most subject teachers are well aware, there is a historically-based and changing set of debates and tensions *within* each different subject-area (and their surrounding knowledge field). Many people today are not keen on 'traditional subjects' as a framework for school curriculum: they would rather talk about 'basics' or '21st century skills' or 'capabilities'. But reading the chapters in this section on the 'learning areas' shows something of the richness of human activity in different areas of knowledge, and what may be lost if these are left outside the picture: the danger of superficial ends-means instrumental thinking. The Australian Curriculum of course tried to have something of three different ways of thinking about what was important for students today, in its matrix of learning areas, capabilities, and cross-curriculum priorities, and that brings its own problems of over-complexity which were a target of the commissioned review, and are discussed in later sections of this book.

In the section on the 'learning areas', each chapter is written by an author or authors with long-standing roots in their respective fields and they can comment with some specificity on the form which the Australian Curriculum now sets up for their field: Doecke, McLean Davies and Sawyer on English; Corrigan on science; Goos on Mathematics; Fler on technologies; Tudball on humanities and social sciences; Ewing on the arts; Penney on health and physical education; and Kohler and Scarino on languages. Although some learning areas may have a familiar name, this does not mean they are simply repeating the curriculum of the past. Together these chapters give a glimpse of issues subject-based curriculum writers and teachers may be trying to balance or resolve: what emphasis to process and what to content for example; is the overarching purpose 'science for all' or is it about the preparation of scientists of the future?; how do you design a framework for a field that brings together what were previously two quite separate types of knowledge areas (design and computer studies in the case of technologies; and health education and physical education in the case of HPE)?; how do you deal with

languages given that there is no longer a simple binary between native and non-native speakers, and that students may have to take on a different language in secondary school than they do in primary?

Some of these chapters speak from a strong advocacy position for a particular view of their subject area; others try to give a more neutral account of the kinds of differences that have shaped their field; but all remind us that at the same time as there is government and policy thinking about what schools should be doing overall, there are other layers of work going on in relation to what kinds of things matter in science or in English or in the arts. What these chapters help us do is think about the choices being made at the framework level as fields move on and change. They also help us to see through some of the simplicities of political rhetoric that introduced the move to an Australian Curriculum as one that would apparently inevitably push our results up on the global rankings. For example Deborah Corrigan's very interesting discussion of science, lets us see something of the 'science for all' ethos of the AC, and how this differed as a conception from what PISA measures (science literacy) or what TIMSS measures (content knowledge). In other words, she argues that key international assessment mechanisms are at odds (at least to some extent) with the overarching intent of a science for all focus. So choices about the best way to develop science among Australian students may not produce a straightforward correlation with what is being measured in those endlessly publicized international tables, but that does not mean they have failed. Goos' chapter considers some differences in what is emphasized in the US maths curriculum and what is done in Australia. The picture she builds suggests not that one national approach is simply superior to the other, but that there are some strengths and weaknesses evident in both. And her account also draws attention to the histories of maths curriculum in the two countries from which the present approaches emerge.

Two new learning areas in the AC represent new amalgamations of previously separate areas of the curriculum, and the contributors here are broadly positive about what has been achieved, but they point to different ways the amalgamation has been achieved in the two cases. For Technologies, Marilyn Fler sees inevitable differences of culture and history between the design field and the digital computing field, but she argues that this has produced a futures orientation to the work of designing the new Technologies learning area. She sees the fact that the tensions are not easily resolved as productive, keeping alive an ongoing dialectic about what to do and how to assess, the tensions keeping curriculum thinking in this area alive and not fossilized as a plan. For Health and Physical Education, Dawn Penney discusses the different curriculum histories of the different states in these areas, and argues that the AC has been a pragmatic compromise that is open enough to avoid too much confrontation with these state histories and cultures, but at the expense of some loss of

uniformity in what the new curriculum will represent at the enactment stage.

Three chapters in this section on learning areas draw our attention to the significance of resources, not just the curriculum framework, for what is actually enacted in schools. For Libby Tudball, the aspiration for 'active citizenship' in humanities and social science cannot be sufficiently accomplished by a 'content-led and knowledge-based' approach but requires space for active approaches in and out of school. For Robyn Ewing, resourcing is a key issue for what range of studies and activities will actually be offered in schools under the Arts rubric, and she foresees continued problems of inequality here. And Michelle Kohler and Angela Scarino's chapter on languages education shows the compromises developed here to address the reality of what Australian primary and secondary schools will actually be able to do, given the limited availability of language teachers and the reality that students often have to move to a different language as they progress from primary to secondary school.

One innovation of the AC framework was its matrix structure, with seven 'general capabilities' and three 'cross curriculum priorities' nominated in addition to the 'learning areas' as the underpinning form of what Australian students were to be given access to. Two chapters of the book provide excellent succinct overviews of the intentions of these moves and some relevant debates related to them. In terms of the cross curriculum priorities, Deborah Henderson draws attention to why this kind of thinking might be an appropriate component of designing a new national curriculum: that curriculum is about 'who should they become?' as well as 'what should they know?' So, if a national curriculum is to be designated, it is not unreasonable to give some attention to what Australian young people should become and learn about (in this case indigenous knowledge, Asia literacies and sustainability). Indeed, in this component in particular, the AC is clearly taking up, at least some of the explicit values agenda that Reid argued was missing in the preceding rationale for a national curriculum. But the problem of any values agendas that are not so abstract that they virtually have no bite, is that, in a democracy, they attract criticism. The designation of 'priorities' will inevitably have a flavour of the politics (or party in government) of the day. As Henderson recounts, submissions to the Donnelly and Wiltshire review raised many questions about the educational and practical meaning of this part of the matrix, and the outcome has been both to clarify but also to reduce their role within the learning areas.

In terms of the general capabilities, Rob Gilbert provides an excellent discussion of one of the key debates of recent years: what *are* 'capabilities', and how do they relate to 'knowledge' and 'skills'. Seven 'general capabilities' were identified in the AC framework: literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and

intercultural understanding. Gilbert argues that, at least as intended, these capabilities were not a check-list of low-level competencies, but are potentially important sources of ‘conceptual and epistemic coherence’ in areas that are different from but complementary to the designated learning areas. However Gilbert acknowledges the complexity that this kind of matrix builds up for teachers, and the related dangers of what may happen at an enactment level.

Most people are highly aware of the strong links between assessment, curriculum and pedagogy and the way in which assessment is now often the driver of all three. In the third chapter of this section Wyatt-Smith and Adie discuss assessment in the context of the Australian Curriculum, and the problem that ACARA had no authority in this area: they could set up achievement standards, but assessment (beyond NAPLAN) remains the province of state authorities and schools. Where some other chapters argue for a reduced authority and scope for an Australian Curriculum, this chapter argues that a national ‘framing position’ on assessment is necessary if the intent of the curriculum is to be achieved – and preferably one that works with work samples.

In this first half of the book then, the writers are responding fairly directly to what the ‘Australian Curriculum’ is doing, in terms of its organizational form, and in terms of the specificities of its components. When we move to perspectives on ‘inclusion and diversity’, the chapters are more directly critical of the national framework enterprise itself as an approach. Brennan and Zipin use Nancy Fraser’s (2009) benchmarks of fairness: representation, recognition and redistribution, to argue that the move fails on all three. They argue that the consultations that surrounded the development were highly circumscribed, with limited role for teachers. Later in the book Savage also refers to a ‘haziness’ in relation to ACARA’s actual decision-making process, and Green notes Fensham’s (2013) earlier critique about the hidden role of the bureaucracy in how decisions were actually made in relation to the science curriculum. On ‘recognition’, Brennan and Zipin see the curriculum as not serving disadvantaged groups, in that ‘high quality’ knowledge ‘is not culturally neutral’ and they see it as conflating the two. And, given what they see as a failure to engage with either resources or properly with students from very different backgrounds, ‘redistribution’ was not really on the agenda. At best the national agenda was about improving access of the disadvantaged to what was valued in the mainstream. Brennan and Zipin argue against the adequacy of a centralized response of the AC form in relation to the differences among students and their circumstances. They call for local action that is more responsive to students. In a later chapter, on ‘curriculum integration’, Mockler makes a similar argument, drawing on Dewey’s (1938) work on experience and making a case for an active engagement between teachers and students rather than a content-based plan or testing agendas as the way towards a good curriculum.

Similar themes thread through other chapters concerned with ‘inclusion and diversity’. Roberts, whose concern is rural students, criticizes the AC as ‘metro-cosmopolitan’ in its assumptions about what kinds of knowledge matter, and sees it as ‘ambivalent about rurality’ which is associated with the past rather than the global future. Price and Slee writing about disability, recount some steps forward on this front in response to initial criticisms, but share with Brennan and Zipin concerns about both representation and recognition. They are concerned about a lack of voices of people with disabilities in the planning; and about recognition, in that the core of the curriculum is the mainstream, and the progress being made is about better provision for fitting students with special needs to that. Rigney, writing on Aboriginal education argues that a ‘highly centralized common culture curriculum’ is problematic. He welcomes the move to include indigenous knowledge as a mandatory feature of the curriculum, but is concerned about the quality of intellectual breadth and depth and assessment in what is proposed in relation to it.

In relation to curriculum, there is a long history of attempts to address education and inequalities and diversities in different ways, with some trying to extend or guarantee some kind of common ‘access’ to education opportunity (the broad mode of the AC) and others putting the emphasis on working politically with disadvantaged students, building on what they bring. These are not entirely binaries (Yates 2013, 2018) and most scholars of inequality (and the AC documents themselves) try to have something of both, but there are certainly choices to be made about which starting point is most promising at a particular time and place, especially given that there seems to be virtually no appetite for ‘redistribution’ approaches at a policy level, and broad social and education inequalities seem to have worsened. The four chapters here do bring out well the way in which resource issues are part of the inclusive education agenda, but also the big challenges for specifying curriculum content even at a broad level: what should the non-disadvantaged/ non-indigenous be learning about other social groups? If there is a ‘metro-cosmopolitan’ bias in curriculum is the response to open up (or close down) different types of paths for different groups?

In terms of resources (and redistribution), both Price and Slee’s chapter on disability and Rigney’s chapter on Aboriginal education emphasize the real limitations of the ‘curriculum as plan’, whatever it is. They see what is brought to bear at the school level as equally or more important to really confronting the forms of marginalization they are concerned about, and particularly the awareness, confidence, resources and knowledge teachers are or are not able to bring to their work and interactions with students. Both chapters want more attention to be given to the resourcing and support needed for this to happen across the country, not simply to fine details of framework documents.

Thinking about curriculum in the light of this book

Curriculum is not something that is easy to pin down: it looks like a concrete everyday term but in fact is rife with complexity about what kind of thing is actually being questioned, analysed or thought about. Curriculum attention includes documents, events, rationales, assumptions, enactments at different levels and tending in different directions, and, particularly when we are talking of the Australian Curriculum, a time dimension. The time dimension in this case is more fraught than the previous state-based curriculum reforms that also commonly took several years to produce, usually beginning with a commissioned report and announcements at a policy level, then producing some overarching plan, moving to more specific guidance and resources to practices and enactments in schools. The AC was complicated because it brings in not just a larger scale of actors and targets of implementation but also the different historical cultures of different states in relation to education, and their political desires either to be part of or resist a national consensus. In this part of the article I want to return to what this attempt to move to an Australian Curriculum has shown or provoked. I will begin with some provocations made within the book itself.

In chapter 19 of the book Glenn Savage discusses the rise of ACARA and a national agenda in the context of political power-plays of states and commonwealth in relation to federalism. He comments:

When viewed from a broader historical perspective, the changes that took place were phenomenal. In just a few years, Australia went from having no national curriculum, assessment or reporting mechanisms, to having vast new policy infrastructure in the form of the AC, NAPLAN and MySchool. (p. 243)

Savage argues that this period in which ACARA was set up and the different components of the Australian Curriculum were written, distributed for consultation, rewritten, reviewed, rewritten and finally agreed among the various Ministers created a new ‘national policy assemblage’. But now, Savage argues, we are in an enactment phase in which states are again the central players. And the political terrain is shifting, the appetite for ‘national consistency’ again waning. As state ‘translations and re-assemblages of the AC’ are put in place, Savage notes:

This not only underlines the crucial difference between *written* and *enacted* policy, but also raises **an interesting question about the extent to which the AC ‘actually exists’ in practice.** (p. 247). [emphasis added by me]

Later, in the final chapter of the book, Bill Green raises further pertinent reflections about what is this ‘curriculum’ that we are trying to talk about. For one thing there is Deng’s (2011) distinction between the curriculum as *symbolic*, the curriculum as *institutionalised*, and the curriculum as *operational*. Not everything that is in curriculum policy documents is even intended to directly shape or constrain teachers’ practices: it is often rhetorically signalling certain values for public or political purposes, and may or may not be tied to what is required to be done in schools (the much-cited *Melbourne Declaration* I would argue is a case in point) (Yates et al. 2011).

For another thing, there is the sheer complexity of the different takes on knowledge, curriculum purposes, diversity and inclusion that I have tried to give some sense of in the first half of this article. Speaking of the ‘learning areas’, ‘capabilities’, ‘cross-curriculum priorities’ matrix, Green puts it well:

It is not just a matter of difficulty [of representing how they are meant to interact] but rather of its inescapable, irreducible complexity, and even its impossibility. [...] what is being papered over is the sheer complexity of bringing together such disparate and even commensurate categories ... (p. 270)

Green argues that in the face of this, and again very much to the point:

Once initiated in accordance with party-political interests and agendas, it quickly became highly bureaucratised [...] Hence a technical common sense has arisen, whereby official curriculum documents have the form they have, based largely on policy imaginaries and bureaucratic convenience. This is indeed a major failing on the part of curriculum scholars, as they suggest a lack of practical guidance, and of workable alternatives. (p. 273)

In the remainder of this review I want to take up some of the issues and questions this collection of perspectives and accounts of the recent decade or so of curriculum making in Australia raised for me.

The first set of issues concerns the kind of curriculum specification that the Australian Curriculum represents. Do we need some kind of framework like this, or are we better off without one? What are the starting points and the rationale for these? (knowledge, ‘confidence’, creativity, twenty-first century skills etc.). What level of specification should such a framework take? How uniform should it be? How extensive, how much detail, how much pinning down? How much checking/support? If there is to be a framework at a national level, what should lie inside and what outside the framework: consider in particular pedagogy, assessment, resources?

One of the ostensible rationales that drove the US ‘No Child Left Behind’ movement for a more ‘evidence-based’ approach to schools is that, unlike science, education and education research has too much of a pendulum quality – swinging back and forth between support for uniformity or for diversity; for didactic or for action-based pedagogies; for system or individual emphases, and many more. The argument is that doing this is a sign that we don’t make progress; that research isn’t building in any cumulative way. In the contributions of this volume we can see some of the reasons why this might be so. If there is too much detail or uniformity in what is prescribed, it risks a dead-hand on teaching practices and the experiences of students, so people call for less detail and rather broad principles. But if directions are framed as principles (think ‘general capabilities’), many call for more clarity and detail of what these mean, and where and how they are to be put in place. When the proposed ‘national curriculum’ framework was to be only for four subjects, most others argued for every area to be in it. When it once again seemed too complex, the complaint was there was too little room to move. And if major attention was being given via the setting up of ACARA to curriculum as something that matters, people drew attention to resources, pedagogy, support as the areas that really deserve attention. Actually all of these positions have something of value in them. In any case, the clearest evidence of the pendulum problem is not, as it happens, found in researchers’ or teachers’ responses to the AC, but in the most recent report and issues paper commissioned by the government, *Through growth to achievement: The review to achieve educational excellence in Australian Schools* (popularly known as Gonski 2.0) (2018).

In Gonski 2.0 we move back to the idea that curriculum doesn’t much matter – or at least many of the difficult kinds of renewal the AC was focused on in its reviews of the learning areas. Instead of a focus on what all students should have some access to, what matters now is making every student a ‘creative, connected and engaged learner in a rapidly changing world’. Teaching and learning should be individualized and personalized – none of this idea that schools form social values, and not just individual competitive test scores. And now, in contrast to the government’s last commissioned report (the Donnelly and Wiltshire Review), it is the ‘general capabilities’ and ‘community engagement’ that are proposed as the heart of a twenty-first century education.

This latest report is a proposal and not yet in any sense a legislative agenda. And the review was responding to, and does, address a far greater range of educational issues than were the brief of ACARA: including resourcing, professional support, the senior secondary curriculum, school leadership, setting up new data collating bodies, to name a few. In some ways (in form at least) it is more like Stenhouse’s (1975) ‘curriculum proposal’, this time one re-emphasizing process, than the kind of template for curriculum developed by ACARA. In other ways it continues the current obsession with data and international ratings as the main things that really matter.

One of the big debates of the past decades has been about disciplines or fields of human knowledge versus twenty-first century skills. The AC, admirably in my view, tried to have something of both kinds of thinking, but proved just how difficult that is to do in practice. This latest proposal, chaired by someone outside education, does not explicitly reject the array of learning areas (though you could easily miss this part of it), but opts for a common popular understanding of what we need today – basic literacy and numeracy and active, flexible life-long learners. It sets up some principles and another wish-list, but it doesn’t tackle the difficult issues. The Terms of Reference want to ‘improve the preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education’, improve outcomes across all cohorts of students; and improve student outcomes and Australia’s national performance ‘as measured by national and international assessments of student achievement’. But, as we well know, if the latter is being taken seriously it seriously cuts across what happens in the teaching learning space; it embeds a competitive agenda and a particular way of thinking about education at the heart of what schools are doing. And the issue of what is involved in ‘improving the preparedness of school leavers to succeed’ is precisely what the huge outpouring of curriculum debates over the past couple of decades have been about – and not all coming up with the same answer.

It is true, as Alan Reid argues in the opening chapter of this book, that moves towards ‘national consistency’ were often couched in unproven rationales about efficiency or about better achievement. But the work of ACARA is also, in part at least, a familiar part of curriculum-making, coming from a belief in a periodic need to refresh curricula. Coming to a new national consensus on substance and values is not likely in a country where schooling policy is an important carrier of product differentiation between political parties, and where individualism, choice and competitiveness have been well entrenched by governments of both sides in the public’s understanding of what schooling is about. Attempting to build a new framework at a national level involved a large amount of complexity and management, and, inevitably, of bureaucratic templates and resolutions. I say ‘inevitably’ here not just because what was now being done was national (though issues of trying to manage this scale have some relevance), but because the logic of how to produce ‘good’ education is now so focused on audit and assessment and data, inside schools as well as at state level and nationally.

Responses to the Australian Curriculum make very clear the importance of considering the relationship between what teachers do and the knowledge, frameworks and previous experiences they bring to that. When a new curriculum plan like this is set up much of the discussion is how it will actually be taken up in schools, the extent to which it constrains or may conflict with what teachers do and what students will take from those experiences. Given subsequent developments, the

AC may turn out to be not only the first national framework for curriculum in Australia but also the last attempt at a big detailed national curriculum specification, with governments retreating once again to whatever is measured nationally and internationally, and to the lobbying of bodies like the Academy of Science or the Business Council of Australia. But this edited collection by Reid and Price on the Australian Curriculum has opened up important questions about education purposes, substance, inequalities; and about interactions between different levels of thinking about and working on curriculum. It enables us to get a range of insights about the ways the form of this particular framework, its sources and its substance have worked, both as constraint and as renewal.

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