Australian Curriculum implementation in a remote Aboriginal school: A curriculum leader's search for a transformational compromise

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This paper examines the trial implementation of the Australian Curriculum in a remote Aboriginal school. It was a school that at the time was beginning to achieve successes with the development of dual-knowledge, transformational outcomes based curriculum that had its justification in the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. Drawing on the work of van Manen (1990) this paper uses lived experience as the methodology. It deals with an early-career teacher's struggle to remain faithful to her employer-directed task of introducing the Australian Curriculum while providing space for the Aboriginal world the school had a responsibility to serve. The discussion is placed within the context of national curriculum development and implementation in Australia. In scrutinizing this teacher's experience, the paper attempts to examine the broad question of the capability of small schools serving Aboriginal communities to implement national curriculum reform. It then details the issue as not simply a question of compatibility and resourcing but also a complex one of ethics. The experience contributes to the field by highlighting the struggle faced by those teachers caught between governmental reforms and the desires of Aboriginal communities for meaningful inclusion of cultural content within the curriculum.

Keywords: Aboriginal education; national curriculum; lived experience; curriculum policy; curriculum implementation; cultural diversity

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Comment:

This paper, drafted in 2013 for a panel discussion, does not claim to be any more than a reflective piece written by an early-career teacher. In hindsight, the experiences detailed below were formative in how I now view education and the position of teachers implementing national curriculum in schools that serve marginalised minority groups.

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

There have been numerous attempts, over the past 35 years, by the Australian federal government to develop and implement a national curriculum. It was noted in: *A core curriculum for Australian schools: What it is and why it is needed,* a document produced by the Curriculum Development Centre (1980), that the notion of a national curriculum first emerged in Australia. The current move in Australia is relatively recent and can now be considered a success, though it has not been without contention (Harris-Hart, 2010).

The "education revolution" began with a change of federal government in 2007, and in early 2008 an interim National Curriculum Board was established (Brennan, 2011). Announced in May 2009 to replace the National Curriculum Board, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was given responsibility for the formation of a national curriculum, a national assessment program and national data collection (ACARA, 2011a). Two key documents: the *Melbourne declaration on education goals for young Australians* (2008); and the *Shape of the Australian curriculum* (2009), guided ACARA in this task. Endeavouring to support "all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens", the *Melbourne Declaration* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008) was endorsed by all Australian education ministers. The *Shape* documents further supported this vision, and guided the formation of the Australian Curriculum: English, Mathematics, History and Science. The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum v4.0* (ACARA, 2012a) was endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in late 2012, and provided the background for the development and implementation of the national curriculum and advice on meeting the needs of the diverse range of students in the Australian education system (ACARA, 2012b).

Set within three broad phases, the development of the Australian Curriculum (AC) is well underway: Phase 1, the development of the AC for English, Mathematics, Science and History (F-10 published 2010; 11-12 in development); Phase 2, the development of the AC for Geography, Languages and the Arts (in development from 2010); and Phase 3, the development of the AC for the remaining areas identified in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (in development from 2011) (ACARA, 2011b). Concurrent to ACARA's phases of development have been implementation time frames adopted by individual states and territories since 2011.

RATIONALE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Since federation in 1901, education is the responsibility of the states and territories. Traditionally, each state and territory has maintained its own public education system. State cultures within Australia have developed over time in education, with differing approaches to curriculum that respond to the vastly different histories, geographies and demographies of each of the states and territories (Yates, Collins & O'Connor, 2011). Originally extolled as a key advantage for the adoption of a national curriculum was the bringing into alignment those differences in school culture and organisations across the nation (Barr, 2010). It could be argued, however, that these differences established within state and territory systems, their schooling culture, organisation and curriculum were founded on an attempt to cater for the diversity found amongst the states and territories' own student populations. Ditchburn (2012) has critiqued the nature of the AC, stating,

> Disconnected from local realities, the Australian curriculum is being introduced as a decontextualised edifice, depersonalised and homogenized; it has eschewed the celebration of difference and adopted a one-size fits-all approach that appears to have been overwhelmingly accepted by the majority of educators and the wider Australian community (p. 259)

Others, too, have questioned how the AC will deal with the different educational needs of Indigenous schools and those of selective high schools in urban areas (Brennan, 2011).

Despite questions of contextuality, increasing standardisation within education has seen national approaches to assessment, curriculum, and reporting develop in education both locally and internationally. Federal standardisation interventions in education are often perceived as devices to increase national cohesiveness and consolidate multiculturalism, particularly in the area of curriculum (Symes & Preston, 1997). Harris-Hart (2010) comments that this is certainly the case in Australia where social cohesiveness has, over the past 35 years, been cited as an argument for the development of a national curriculum. Historically, education plays a key role in the transmission of "dominant social, cultural and political system[s] to young people, with the goal of creating a cohesive nation state" (Bromley, 2011, p. 152). Cornbleth (2000) comments that nation states are at risk of losing their cultural identities as population diversity increases due to globalisation. With mass education operating as a key means of nation-building through the transmission of a national persona and socialisation for citizenship, the renewal of nation-building efforts through public education respond to this diversification of populations.

National cohesiveness, however, is just part of the rationale for national curriculum; it sits within the broader issue of the construction of a national policy space in education. Economic interests have a very significant impact on federal concerns within the education system in a neo-liberal global economy. In Australia, education policies have been economised as a result of this neo-liberal global economic climate, with schools being viewed as a means of producing a skilled workforce capable of serving the national economic need (Cornbleth, 2000; Lingard, 2010). The supporting of educational development by the state is crucial within the current global economic market, because education and skills are necessary for the mass labour force and, therefore, the global economy (Olssen, 2004). This international trend within the field of education now uses human capital and productivity rationales as well as economic restructuring as the metapolicy behind education policy reform (Lingard 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Considering context

The Northern Territory (NT) offers a unique educational landscape in terms of geography and student demographic in which to consider national curriculum implementation. Government school locations are classified as provincial (Darwin and Palmerston schools), remote (Alice Springs and Katherine schools) and very remote (all other NT schools). At the time of writing, there are approximately 150 government schools and 40 Homeland Learning Centres across the NT (NTG, 2009a). A relatively small number of 33,141 students were enrolled across the NT in 2012 (NTG, 2009b). Of these students, 47.35 percent are enrolled in remote or very remote locations, and 44.55 percent recognise themselves as Indigenous (NTG, 2009b). According to the Northern Territory Department of Education, 85 schools of the 188 government and non-government schools across the territory have nearly 100 percent Indigenous enrolment (NTG, 2009a). The NT has the highest percentage of Indigenous people out of all other Australian states and territories (30% compared with 4% or less) (ABS, 2012).

With this high percentage of Indigenous students within the state education sector, the Northern Territory Department of Education offers Indigenous Languages and Culture as a subject area within the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) (NTDEET, 2002). Three main sub-sections found within the Indigenous Languages and Culture subject are: culture, language maintenance and language revitalisation. Under the NTCF,

Indigenous Languages and Culture can be taught from Transition (the equivalent of Prep in other states and territories) through to the senior years of schooling.

SHIFTING APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE

The introduction of the AC in the NT will see a shift in approaches to the teaching of Aboriginal knowledge and culture—from a unit of study or separate subject within the NTCF to a cross-curricular priority to be interwoven throughout the AC. It is yet to be seen how the system and schools will respond to this change. According to the Northern Territory Department of Education, the NTCF Indigenous Language and Culture learning area is required to be used by teachers until it is replaced by the relevant AC learning area or subject (NTG, 2009c). Whether a part of the future curriculum or not in its present form, it will still be necessary for teachers to respond to the cross-curricular priorities and embed them within subject areas.

According to ACARA, the presence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures priority within the AC will vary depending on relevance (ACARA, n.d.). This risks Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures being taught within a multicultural education framework that could potentially trivialize cultural artifacts and do little to explore the fundamentally different knowledge systems and philosophies of cultures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). While cross-curriculum priorities, competencies and capabilities are an important educational intention; they are not necessarily always translated to a programmatic learning reality (Dellit, 2001). Teachers will, ultimately, be responsible for selecting when, how and to what extent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are included in the curriculum; further development is required in this area. As Nakata (2011) states:

> There is nothing ahead but the real work of curriculum development. Content needs to be selected and placed where it fits . . . How it is taught and how it is used to develop awareness of Indigenous experience for all students, and how it is used in the education of Indigenous students require further attention and development . . . the real work is not yet done (p.7-8).

In the absence of explicit direction or strategies from ACARA as to how teachers include this cross-curricular priority, Rigney (2011) offers a model for incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. The first step for teachers is to determine if there is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective—Rigney notes that, at times, there will not be. In his advice to teachers, Rigney cautions against forcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum, as it can "lead to tokenism and trivialisation and does not honour Indigenous cultures or the learning area" (p. 15). When placed in a position of teaching AC content to Aboriginal children, however—and in a community keen on the transmission of local culture and knowledge through formal schooling—the approach needs to differ. Teachers in remote Aboriginal communities, such as those detailed below, need to embed Aboriginal knowledge and culture into the curriculum in order to at least minimally satisfy Article 14 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, particularly Article 14.3:

> States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

For Aboriginal students, integrating meaningful links to children's own experiences and cultural capital can assist in acting as a hook for learning the standard curriculum offering (Nakata, 2011). Nakata (2011) comments that the use of familiar content and examples are critical in conceptual development, but teachers have to ensure that students are then "taken on to make the connections to the wider curriculum content . . . and delve into deeper and more abstract learning" (p. 5). In these markedly different teaching and learning contexts, multiple approaches to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curricular priority are necessary under the AC. How teachers will approach the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curricular priority in different educational contexts across Australia is yet to be seen.

FROM A TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE…

It was within this broader educational policy reform context that my teaching career in a remote Aboriginal community began. It was a time of national curriculum development but such development appeared unlikely to concern me. Discussions were beginning to be had by stakeholders across the country but I had little exposure to the complexities of curriculum formation.

I arrived at my first school in Elliott, in the NT, some 750 kilometres south of Darwin, in 2010 as a graduate teacher. Believing I was prepared both professionally and culturally for the challenge of remote teaching and living, I saw it as an opportunity to enter the profession and gain valuable teaching experience. I found myself with brilliant young colleagues but there were community tensions, the principal was ill and the school was struggling on all fronts.

Six months into my appointment, a new principal arrived. He announced his doctorate was about negotiated curriculum. He was convinced of the value of dual-knowledge systems in schools and said he would push the school as close to Harris's (1990) *Two Way Education* as the Northern Territory Department of Education would allow. He wanted to exploit to the full NTCF to achieve Spady's (1994) school-based transformational outcomes curriculum. He explained that he planned to apply a mission-based management approach to the school's operation and devolve responsibility for projects within the school on the basis of interest and capability. On this foundation, he set out to realign the school's relationship with its Aboriginal community.

When the departmental requirement to trial the new AC arrived, he saw it as a distraction from the main game of creating a dual-knowledge transformational outcomes-based curriculum. He decided to focus on what he had begun and passed responsibility for the AC to me with the proviso that I explore opportunities for continued dual-knowledge and VET-based programs, such as the horsemanship/rural operations endeavour. At the time, I saw my role as primarily managing the trial of the AC in my Middle Years classroom, but the principal, who had a passion for staff development, saw my interest in curriculum and sought to foster my skills in the school-wide management of this area.

When the AC trial started, we had spent over 12 months developing the school's dual-knowledge curriculum. The vision of our curriculum innovation was presented to the local community and the Education Department's higher management in *Elliott School and the Longreach Waterhole* in Term 4, 2011 (Duffy, 2011). The school was seeing

positive results with increased student engagement, as well as higher levels of community involvement as a consequence of the dual-knowledge and contextual approach. We welcomed the increased presence of parents and community leaders into the school, and did not want to jeopardise the work already achieved for the sake of a mandated national curriculum.

The trialling of the AC required me to mesh together two very different curriculum documents—one being content driven and the other outcomes-based—while attempting to retain the valuable programs already developed that sought to capitalize on Elliott's local context. In my own classroom, my team teacher and I sought to continue our dual-knowledge ethos and created units of work for Australian Curriculum Mathematics and English that aligned to the school-wide "Caring for Country" environmental science theme already in place. With the support of the Indigenous Language and Culture teacher and key community members, we continued to spend at least one day per week at the local billabong. This provided a teaching space which offered a place where both western and Aboriginal knowledge could be taught in unison.

Upon self-assessing, I was pleased with my management of the AC trial. Neither students nor community members noticed a change in curriculum delivery. We maintained our pedagogical styles and adapted programs to conform as far as possible to the AC documentation. We rearranged lesson content to suit both our unique context and the AC requirement to match content to age and grade. The trial, however, was not an easy task, and carried practical, philosophical and ethical complexities, including incongruence of design and use, the adaption to multi-grade and English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) context, assessing against mainstream standards and the privileging of particular content within curriculum.

I was to teach my students content and skills that "all young Australians should learn", despite my students having dramatically different ontologies and epistemologies to those that could be termed "mainstream students" (ACARA, 2012b). I felt the mandating of such a curriculum did nothing to acknowledge the context of our remote Aboriginal community and the unique set of skills and knowledge that my students would need to live at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007), moving between both Aboriginal and "white fella" worlds.

I believed in the importance of the school's vision and mission of equipping our students with the necessary skills and knowledge to operate at the cultural interface (Baker, 2010):

> **Vision statement**
> Our vision for Elliott School is of a small school catering for students from preschool to grade 12 using a mix of traditional and innovative pedagogy to make it possible for children and young people from Elliott to match the achievements of their peers from metropolitan Australia while gaining an appreciation of their place within Aboriginal Culture and society.

> **Mission statement**
> The mission of Elliott School is to provide an education to the young people of Elliott that will equip them with the capacity to function at levels of their own choosing in the Australian economy and to contribute some of the knowledge and skills required to explore their Aboriginal heritage and their place in it.

I felt that the AC trial could be reconciled with this so long as staff remained vigilant in maintaining the school's vision and mission. If not, the efforts of the school to assist community leaders in widening the students' appreciation of their place within Aboriginal culture and society could easily be overridden. I had to attempt the trial at a time when there was increased scrutiny of the school by both the Regional Education Office and the local community. I was under pressure to produce mainstream test results and local Aboriginal relevance. It was not an easy position to be in.

Practical issues affecting day-to-day programming included the incongruence of the design and use of the AC found during the trial. Understandably, designed for mainstream contexts where students are traditionally organised by year level, the AC did not easily adapt to a multi-grade context in which I had students ranging from Years 5 to 10 in the one classroom. I saw this issue would only become more difficult to address with the introduction of other AC subjects, particularly history, where the interrelated strands may provide linkages across year levels but the content does not. There was little information available as to how to approach the complexities of delivering the AC in a multi-grade classroom, particularly one in which all students had EAL/D. It was not until later that I saw my own frustrations were recognised by others, with Brennan (2011) commenting that the AC, in its design, fails to recognise "the existence of P-12 or area schools, multi-age classrooms or settings which are largely Indigenous" (p. 267).

In the short term, this lack of understanding on how to approach the AC in a multi-grade setting worked in my favour during the trial. I was able to select content descriptors that I deemed appropriate to our whole-school theme of "Caring for Country" and teach these at varying levels to the class. Many, familiar with the English AC, would find the number of content descriptors I selected laughable: three. Of course, this was not at all realistic in attempting to cover the entire English curriculum over the year when Year 1, for example, has 34 content descriptors. Nevertheless, I selected just one content descriptor from each of the sub-strands (Literacy, Language and Literature) for the term focus. Many others were present in our everyday teaching and learning but at levels far below the expected standard for each year level.

We experienced additional practical issues with assessment because my team teacher and I were to deliver AC content in Mathematics and English but assess using the NTCF, an outcomes-based document. In the end, it meant little change to the reporting of student progression, which was a welcomed reprieve from what I saw as a major future issue: the assessing of students using the AC A to E assessment scale. I voiced my concerns to staff that the implementation of this scale would see potentially all of Elliott School failing. This could be highly problematic because, without additional tools to assess and measure outcomes, it would be difficult for teachers to monitor progression. I also believed this method of reporting, in a context where many students were not meeting minimum national standards, had the potential to further alienate students from schooling.

Despite the practical issues experienced, initial staff reactions (communicated at weekly staff meetings and discussions) to the trial were relatively positive; it seemed that, with enough flexibility, the AC could be moulded to fit our dual-knowledge approach to curriculum. I asserted that the practical concerns, however, that impinged upon day-to-day practice, including multi-grade adaptation, EAL/D approaches and assessment methods, would only become more challenging with full implementation if there was a

lack of direction and staff development. I was concerned the AC did not suit the context in which I was teaching.

My work in Term 4, 2011 in implementing the AC trial saw me promoted to Curriculum Leader. This was a federally funded position designed to assist schools in managing curriculum change. Some would argue, and perhaps I would be amongst them, that this, too, was problematic and is indicative of another issue in remote schools. At a time when I was advocating an increase in training and development to implement the AC, myself as an early-career teacher was tasked with the role of providing it. At the end of Term 4, 2011, with the current principal being seconded elsewhere and my team teacher promoted into the role of acting principal, I was excited about my new role within the school leadership team but also apprehensive as to how much could be achieved. I was to design a school-based curriculum that was appropriate to our school's vision and mission and that met the directive to implement AC Mathematics and English while also dealing with the issues described above.

…TO A CURRICULUM LEADER'S EXPERIENCE

The school's staffing and management arrangements for 2012 meant I was not implementing the AC in my own classroom. This gave me the ability to maintain some distance from the fundamental changes I was causing in the school's teaching and learning environment. Despite the distance, I was acutely aware of the need to streamline the change process as much as possible to avoid placing unnecessary stress on staff, who were already dealing with the day-to-day challenges of remote teaching and living that are highlighted elsewhere (Lock, Budgen, Lunay, & Oakley, 2012; Starr & White, 2008).

When faced with a choice between designing school-based curriculum and implementing the pre-packaged Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) imported from Queensland, I chose to continue on the journey of our school-based approach. I selected a theme for each term, which were school-wide, and provided enough scope for our Indigenous Language and Culture teacher to link subject area content to local culture and knowledge. The teaching of Aboriginal knowledge and culture remained, to a large extent, in the Indigenous Language and Culture teacher's domain, although staff worked to ensure local linkages were interwoven throughout the curriculum.

It was in this role that I saw the opportunities for the integration of Aboriginal knowledge and culture across the curriculum because the Indigenous Language and Culture teacher shared more of the local language and culture with not only students but also with non-Aboriginal staff. She was on a learning journey herself and was leading a cultural revitalisation within the community. At the same time, I saw that, despite these opportunities for integrating Aboriginal knowledge and culture across the curriculum, staff were limited in doing so without the knowledge, direction and support of the Indigenous Language and Culture teacher who was so vital in this process. I also believed that, in future, when faced with the pressures of additional AC subjects being implemented, staff would struggle to find room for meaningful examinations of local Aboriginal knowledge and culture within the content-heavy curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

As Semester 1, 2012 progressed I became increasingly uncomfortable with my role in implementing the AC. The dilemmas I faced were operational and ethical. In looking for answers, all that appeared were more questions, the most pertinent I felt were: Was AC reform within the capability of small multi-age/multi-grade isolated schools serving Aboriginal communities? Whose knowledge systems are privileged in the national curriculum? How can the knowledge of minority cultures find a place within the dominant system? Is it ethical for the dominant culture to mandate the learning requirements for all? And how does any of this sit with Article 14 of the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*?

I began a PhD with the University of New England to investigate the Indigenous education discourses being privileged or marginalised within the AC, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as methodology, and how they correlate with the discourses Aboriginal community members draw upon to express their educational aspirations for their children. In continuing my own learning journey, I hope to address at least some of the above questions and add to national curricula discussions that not only hold relevance in Australia but also in settler nations internationally.

In 2013 I concluded that it may be timely for those involved with the design and production of the AC to look again at how they are addressing the question of providing space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and issues within it. Given, too, that in the current climate, Aboriginal children will inevitably be taught by non-Aboriginal teachers there needs to be developed ways in which teachers can come to terms with the delivery of the AC in an Aboriginal context.

Final note

Some 24 months after constructing this piece it is quite a challenge to read. It is what it is—a reflective piece written at a particular time in my very early career for the purpose of a panel discussion, to stimulate thinking about what it means to be a non-Indigenous teacher injected into a remote Aboriginal community and school, and the practicalities and ethics involved in delivering a national curriculum designed by the dominant culture. I recognize that it is problematic in that it lacks an Indigenous voice. But such is the nature of lived experience in presenting just one perspective at a particular time. As I develop into a critical researcher, naturally that perspective evolves as does my understanding of research with Indigenous peoples. I am indebted to the people of this community and those that guide me for sharing different worldviews and understandings as I continue to learn.

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