

Collaborating and connecting: Making capabilities the core of curriculum

Shani Hartley October 2013

Australia is at a turning point in education. Globalisation and technology have enabled knowledge to be at the fingertips of anyone with an Internet connection. One of the consequences of this social change is a push in curriculum to shift school education from having a focus on knowledge to being more about thinking and other skills considered essential for participating in the modern world. The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) currently has the responsibility of setting curriculum for all of Australia and in New South Wales (NSW) the national curriculum commences in 2014 with four subjects in Years 7 and 9. It is an opportunity for a fresh start, to focus on what really matters in schools and how students learn. Even though ACARA's General Capabilities (2011) seem to take a secondary place to subject content, they could help to shift curriculum direction in Australian schools to drive change through pedagogy and technology to make learning relevant and engaging and to develop higher-order skills such as creativity, innovation and critical thinking. Astute and respectful change management will be required by school leaders to enable such a shift and a collaborative effort by teachers would help drive the change from the bottom up.

Over the last decade there has been an increasing amount of discussion and development of competencies and capabilities in school curriculum. In recent times, the OECD (2005) created a framework of key competencies and the Centre of Social and Economic Research (CASE) produced a comprehensive report into "Key Competencies in Europe" (2009). There are important differences between 'capabilities', 'competencies', 'essential learnings' and 'skills' (Yates & Collins 2010, p.95, Yeung, Ng & Lu 2007, p.2) but for the purposes of this essay, the terms will be used interchangeably. The term 'capabilities' arose from a shift in framework involving economic goals to one where people and their abilities are central (Reid 2005, p.53).

According to CASE (2009), Germany, The Netherlands and France have broad definitions of capacities, “a multi-dimensional concept, combining different forms of knowledge and skills, as well as social and personal qualities” (p.36) whereas “the English system is not a holistic concept, nor does it encompass an individual’s social or civic qualities” (p.37). Yeung et al (2007) investigated what they referred to as ‘generic capabilities’ for lifelong learning when most studies relate to curriculum concentrating on employment potential (p.5). They found the Australian roots of curriculum-based capabilities lie in the work of Finn (1991) and Mayer (1992) (p.3). The current Australian version of capabilities probably lies between the two different models depicted by CASE.

Before the Australian curriculum was written, Professor Alan Reid (2005) wrote a comprehensive report which included compelling arguments for a “capabilities-based approach” (p.6) that “would take the emphasis off the subjects” (p.8). One argument involves that capabilities lie upon a never-ending scale of attainment whereas knowledge is more of a binary concept, either the facts are known or they are not (Reid 2005, p.54). It therefore goes part way to meeting the Melbourne Declaration goal of equity by allowing students to strive to the extent of their capabilities instead of judging them on how successfully they have acquired the prescribed knowledge.

Another criticism is that a subject oriented curriculum does not meet the ever-increasing changing paradigms in the world through globalisation and the rapid increase of technology and communication. In this context, Brennan (2011) identifies the pertinent issue that it is difficult to adapt curriculum to social change since new material and circumstances will often not neatly fit in a subject silo (p.264).

Despite Reid’s report, the Australian curriculum is driven by subjects. Brennan (2011) is inclined to argue “that the Australian curriculum is not curriculum at all [but] a syllabus document specifying content and sequence of content by year level of schooling” (p.264). There could be a number of reasons for this. For instance, due to the drive for national curriculum taking decades, obtaining consensus from the states required some commonalities to build upon (Yates & Collins 2010, p.91). Existing curriculum was constructed around subjects rather than making a drastic change because this was an area that could stay on safe ground. Another explanation for the subject base is the ease to release the

curriculum in stages with four subjects kick-starting the process with English, Mathematics, Science and History effectively establishing the peak of a hierarchy of study areas.

The seven Australian general capabilities (see Figure 1) appear to be broad in concept but lack substance since they appear to have been tacked on as an afterthought to the Australian curriculum. In the words of ACARA (2011), “general capabilities are addressed through the learning areas and are identified wherever they are developed or applied in content descriptions”. In other words, they are added through an overview for each subject and tiny icons littered through the curriculum content to indicate opportunities for inclusion in the teaching process (ACARA n.d.). The capabilities are consequently treated as tick-boxes just like the content itself, another item on the curriculum list to be delivered to students.

| Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority General Capabilities |
|---|
| Literacy |
| Numeracy |
| Information and communication technology capability |
| Critical and creative thinking |
| Personal and social capability |
| Ethical understanding |
| Intercultural understanding. |

Figure 1: ACARA's General Capabilities

The national curriculum is trying to have a foot in both with one foot in the traditional content driven curriculum and one foot in the capabilities camp, but with a definite lean towards the former.

Ditchburn (2012) performed a critical analysis of ACARA's documentation and discovered a distinct narrative that presented the curriculum as a well organised construct, dictating the knowledge to be delivered and thereby meeting the common needs of all students (with a brief nod to their diversity) and addressing the economic and global concerns of Australia (p.358). The clear construct of the national curriculum and the narrative surrounding it presents the Australian Curriculum as a solution for all that is ill in Australian schools when really it fails to deliver what is needed for modern society and the differing individual needs, abilities and desires of students.

ACARA (2013) claims that the general capabilities “play a significant role in realising the goals set out in the Melbourne Declaration” (p.3). The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008) states two broad aims:

- *Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence*
- *All young Australians become:*
 - *Successful learners*
 - *Confident and creative individuals*
 - *Active and informed citizens* (p.7)

The preamble of the Melbourne Declaration has an emphasis writ large about building society through education but the fine print has language more related to the economy, such as “compete in the global economy” and “ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity” (p.4). It is therefore conceivable that in reality the general capabilities exist mainly as a driver for employability of students when they cease their education. After all, governments are becoming increasingly hands-on in the creation of curriculum, attempting to compete on a global scale for improved educational outcomes that lead to even greater economic gains (Yates & Cherry 2010, p.97).

The economy, globally and locally, is important but it should not be the dominant force influencing curriculum. There needs to be more emphasis on students being actively involved in all aspects of community, globally and locally, not just the economic component. Reid (2010) argues it eloquently:

An official curriculum should reflect the kind of society we are and want to become, and should seek to develop the sorts of capabilities that young people need to become active participants in our political, economic, social and cultural life. (Reid 2010, p.31)

By continuing with stand-alone subject silos the general capacities are relegated in importance. Subjects should come under the umbrella of capabilities, “providing coherence across the whole curriculum” (Reid 2010, p.31), and thereby concentrating on the big questions, ideas and issues of contemporary times instead of minute details that obscure the relevance to real life.

Yates and Collins (2010) argue that the purpose of academic secondary education was mainly to obtain grades for entrance to university or the workforce. They may have a point about the upper end of secondary education where historically only those students wishing to have professional careers continued at school and that perhaps “academic subjects are a stumbling block” now that the vast majority of students continue to Year 12 (p.95). However, by claiming that grades were the goal they are dismissing the knowledge used to earn those grades and completely neglecting the continual development of a person and his or her role in society throughout life.

The effect of over emphasis on grades can be seen in South Korea, a country which consistently scores highly in international performance tests, particularly in reading and mathematics (Hong 2012, p.27). Yet the students score relatively poorly in their attitudes towards learning, such as how much they “enjoy learning science” (p.28). This is the way people like Yates and Collins (2010) may view the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in NSW, that it is merely a gateway to further education. School must encompass more than grades and embrace the whole person.

Hong (2012) asserts that the lack of genuine interest in learning by South Koreans is due to the students being drilled in memorising facts and thus “may lack higher-order thinking skills such as creative thinking, problem-solving and self-directed learning” (p.28). He argues that these skills are necessary in today’s globalised economy (p.28), so yet again the economic imperative is brought into play instead of focusing on the students themselves.

A competency-based curriculum would help address the complex concerns of the world and its communities, to tackle the challenges they present and provide an outward looking perspective (OECD 2005, p.4). Subjects, for the most part, concentrate on individual attainment of knowledge but the modern world seeks individuals that are flexible, innovative, creative and self-driven (OECD 2005, p.8).

Key competencies are not determined by arbitrary decisions about what personal qualities are desirable, but by careful consideration of the psychosocial prerequisites for a successful life and a well-functioning society.

(OECD 2005. p.6)

The Australian curriculum has missed an opportunity to shift curriculum to meet the requirements of modern society in a clear and organised fashion. However, all is not lost. The new curriculum has instigated discussion of alternative approaches to curriculum (Ditchburn 2012, p.358). Through careful planning the implementation of national curriculum could still shift emphasis from subject silos to developing capabilities to respond to society's needs and individual concerns that are "of future value to students across all aspects of their lives" (Yates & Collins 2010, p.97). Instead of funnelling the world through a narrow curriculum to the student, education should be about preparing the student for the world (Yates & Collins 2010, p.98).

As the Melbourne Declaration recognises (MCEETYA 2008, p.4), globalisation has had a profound effect on education itself. The breaking down of political, trading and geographical barriers, strongly influenced by the development of the Internet and advanced communication techniques, is altering education from being inward looking to being more world focused. Instead of peering into textbooks, students are beginning to connect with the wider world through technological processes and thus prepare them to some extent to actively participate in and contribute to a globalised community. The general capabilities can assist in this process.

For most schools this needs a monumental change in the form of a transformation as opposed to an additional requirement on top of current practices (Hong 2011, p.27). It needs to be a whole school approach and teachers need to be allowed to take risks as they become more driven by big picture ideas and develop an increasingly student-centred approach to pedagogy.

Hong (2011) investigated a curriculum shift in a particular South Korean school where there was "institutional change and teacher empowerment" to transform curriculum focus from the accumulation of facts to one of learning competencies (p.31). In New Zealand, a school managed a similar change through a "school-wide effort to understand the key competencies specified in the national curriculum and determine how they could be applied" by treating the national curriculum as a mere framework instead of a prescription (Hong 2011, pp.33-34).

Gurr and Drysdale (2012) also focused on leadership from the top and a grassroots effort from teachers as a dual initiative to create constructive change. They asserted that principals need to direct the change and motivate the school community while middle management more directly encourages a pedagogical shift (p.409). Teachers are recognised by Gurr and Drysdale (2012) as “the most significant in-school factor influencing student learning” (p.411) and promote praising teachers for their successes rather than continually holding them responsible for perceived student failures (p.412). They did, however, acknowledge the difficulties associated with developing teachers reluctant to change and the temptation to recruit instead (p.412), not that it is easy to remove teachers in Australia’s education system unless they have acted illegally.

The main issue with shifting from subject silos to a capabilities-based curriculum is the intellectual mastery of the content in which teachers hold their self-efficacy. By reducing the value of their particular subject area it could increase the stress burden and reduce self-efficacy. Some studies have shown teachers self-worth is placed on the effect they can have on students’ lives as a whole and the emotional value that brings, more than being aligned with their subject domain (O’Sullivan 2007) but McCormick and Ayres (2009) cite Bandura (1997) as claiming “mastery experiences” as the strongest source of teacher self-efficacy (p.465). However, it is also related to the number of resources and the time invested in gaining that subject mastery (p.466). Teachers are continually adapting their teaching methods and content to suit the varying circumstances that come before them in their classrooms (student abilities, family situations, the weather, just to name a few) so they are often resistant to curriculum change that they perceive to require a ‘reinvention of the wheel’.

McCormick and Ayres (2009), again using the self-efficacy sources of Bandura (1997), argue that the next self-efficacy area to address is the interaction with peers and experts (p.466). Classroom observations of each other and collaborative planning can help boost the morale of teachers attempting a new curriculum direction. Leadership needs to provide time and opportunity for this to occur in a culture where teamwork is encouraged and there is no fear of trying new pedagogical methods. Then through celebrating successes in an open and connected environment a transformation can occur. This is supported by Hong (2011) who claimed “collegial efforts among teachers are critical to

developing curricula that foster students' key competencies" (p.35). The concept of a teacher operating alone in the classroom needs to go through a metamorphic process to become a consolidated team, particularly at the planning level, for effective implementation of a curriculum to suit the modern world.

If students become the main focus of schools' curriculum, instead of knowledge outcomes, then concentrating on the capabilities makes more sense. The student-centred approach encourages the *use* of knowledge (not the mere accumulation of it) by applying it to different situations to create new meanings and understanding. It emphasises thinking and in-depth understanding of themselves and connecting to the world they live in. The Australian general capabilities broadly meet these goals and to an extent those from the Melbourne Declaration also.

General capabilities need to go beyond the view of the student as a labour resource to being about the whole person, fully participating in both local and global communities. Holding the capabilities as the main goal in education will allow greater flexibility within and across subjects to make connections and thereby enhance learning through the transference of knowledge and ideas. Schools need to overcome the scattergun approach the Australian curriculum has taken with the general capabilities. To do so requires a shift in school culture with strong leadership from above and a ground swell from below. The middle management of schools should utilise the skill and expertise of teachers already implementing student-centred pedagogy in a meaningful way to steer the school culture towards one that values the general capabilities and people as social beings as well as contributors to the economy.

REFERENCE LIST

ACARA (2011). *General Capabilities*

http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/general_capabilities.html

ACARA. (2012). *The Shape of the Australia Curriculum Version 3*, May 2012,

http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/The_Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum_V3.pdf

ACARA. (2013) *General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum*. Retrieved

from <http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Pdf/Overview>

ACARA. (n.d.) *General capabilities in the learning areas*. Retrieved from

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Overview/General-capabilities-in-the-learning-areas>

Australian Law Reform Commission. (1997). Children in education. In *Seen and heard: priority for children in the legal process*. Retrieved from

<http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/10-children-education/children-risk-education-system>

Brennan, M. (2011). National Curriculum: A Political-Educational Tangle.

Australian Journal of Education 55(3), 259-280. DOI:

10.1177/0004944111105500307

Ditchburn, G. (2012). The Australian curriculum: finding the hidden narrative?,

Critical Studies in Education, 53(3), pp.347-360, DOI:

10.1080/17508487.2012.703137

Gordon, J., Halász, G., Krawczyk, M., Leney, T., Michel, A., Pepper, D.,

...Wiśniewski, J., (2009). *Key Competences in Europe: Opening Doors for*

Lifelong Learners Across the School Curriculum and Teacher Education. CASE

Network Reports No. 87. Retrieved from [http://www.case-](http://www.case-research.eu/upload/publikacja_plik/27191519_CNR_87_final.pdf)

[research.eu/upload/publikacja_plik/27191519_CNR_87_final.pdf](http://www.case-research.eu/upload/publikacja_plik/27191519_CNR_87_final.pdf)

Gurr, D. and Drysdale, L. (2012). Tensions and dilemmas in leading Australia's

schools, *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation*,

32(5), pp.403-420, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2012.723619

Hong, W. (2012). An international study of the changing nature and role of

school curricula: from transmitting content knowledge to developing students'

key competencies. *Asia Pacific Educational Review*, 13(1), 27-37.

DOI: 10.1007/s12564-011-9171-z

McCormick, J. & Ayres, P.L. (2009). Teacher self-efficacy and occupational

stress: A major Australian curriculum reform revisited. *Journal of Educational*

Administration, 47(4), 463-476. Retrieved from

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au>

Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2008). *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. Retrieved from http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/melbourne_declaration,25979.html

OECD. (2005). *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies – Executive Summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.deseco.admin.ch/bfs/deseco/en/index/02.html>

O’Sullivan, K. (2007). Unmasking the Professional Identities of English Teachers. *International Journal of Educational Practice and Theory*, 29(1), 5–16. Retrieved from <http://www.library.mq.edu.au/borrowing/ereserve.php> (EDCN813).

Reid, A. (2005). Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra.

Reid, A. (2010). Working towards a ‘world-class’ curriculum. *Professional Educator*, 9(2), 30-33. Retrieved from <http://search.informit.com.au.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/>

Tambyah, M. M. (2011). “More tick-the-box”: the challenge of promoting interdisciplinary learning in the middle years through the Australian history curriculum. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 31(3), 72-77. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/47201/>

Yates, L. & Collins, C. (2010). The Absence of Knowledge in Australian Curriculum Reforms. *European Journal of Education*, 45(1), 2010. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/>

Yeung, A. S., Ng, C., and Winnie L. P. (2007, November). *Generic capabilities for lifelong education: conceptualization and construct validity*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Fremantle. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/yeu07420.pdf>