

Review of the *Curriculum Framework* for curriculum, assessment and reporting purposes in Western Australian schools, with particular reference to years Kindergarten to Year 10

Executive summary

**Perth, Western Australia
August 2009**

*David Andrich, Chapple Professor of Education,
The University of Western Australia*

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Mr John Firth, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, member of the former Interim National Curriculum Board and now a member of the Australian, Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, was consulted and his advice considered.

However, the contents of the final report are the responsibility of the author.

Preface

This report has been prepared as a result of the expert review authorised by the Minister for Education, Hon. Dr Elizabeth Constable MLA, on 11 March 2009.

The review focuses on curriculum, assessment and reporting policies and procedures in Western Australian schools.

The review process involved consultation with experts from the Catholic Education Office, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA), the Department of Education and Training (DET), universities and a range of school types. Experts from professional teaching groups and unions also contributed to the process.

The review was established because of changes to Commonwealth and State education policies, especially those made since the introduction of the *Curriculum Framework* in 1998.

Also acknowledged are the new directions in Commonwealth and State relationships in the development of these policies.

Other significant recent developments have included the raising of the school leaving age in Western Australia to the end of the year in which students turn 17 and the gradual introduction of new courses for Years 11 and 12 students for the Western Australian Certificate of Education.

The report has been prepared during the transitional period between the development of the Interim National Curriculum Board and introduction of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Terms of reference

- To review the *Curriculum Framework* for curriculum, assessment and reporting purposes in Western Australian schools, with particular reference to years Kindergarten to Year 10.
- To advise on the relationship between the *Curriculum Framework* and proposed national curriculum.
- To consider the impact of any proposed changes on teachers and schools in Western Australia.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to those people (listed in Appendix 1 to the full report) who gave generously of their valuable time in being interviewed.

Gail Taylor, Executive Officer, and Cindy Chan, Administrative Support Officer, Curriculum Council of Western Australia, and Natalie Carmody, Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia, provided support in preparing the report.

Introduction

The specific content being taught in schools under the *Curriculum Framework* was considered to be outside the scope of this review. With the present planning for a national curriculum, the emphasis is on what can be learned from the implementation of the *Framework* in Western Australia and applied to the implementation of the national curriculum.

Expertise became the major theme of the review. A subsidiary theme was the expertise of teachers in the content of the learning areas.

Expertise at the school level is referred to in terms of the resources of the school. A very highly-resourced school has substantial size; a principal who is experienced and confident in a position of leadership and has been at the school for some time; a stable and experienced teaching staff who have the time to reflect on broader issues of curriculum implementation; staff who have dedicated time to provide support and leadership in curriculum and professional development; ready access to external professional development; a stable student population in terms of background and attendance, with parents who actively support their children's schooling. Schools range from being modestly to very highly resourced.

Background to the *Curriculum Framework*

The *Curriculum Framework* is a 326-page document published in 1998. Its implementation in all schools in Western Australia is mandated by legislation.

The *Framework* has 13 overarching learning outcomes distributed across eight learning areas. In addition, there are five clusters of core values. It is based on seven governing principles:

- an encompassing view of curriculum;
- an explicit acknowledgement of core values;
- inclusivity;
- flexibility;
- integration, breadth and balance;
- a developmental approach; and
- collaboration and partnership.

There is little disagreement about these outcomes, values and principles. However, implementation has generated widespread debate.

Distinguishing features of the *Curriculum Framework*

The *Framework* claims to be distinguished by ‘a major shift in school curriculum from a focus on educational inputs and time allocation toward one that emphasises the desired results of schooling’ (*Curriculum Framework*, p.6). It stresses that it is neither a curriculum nor a syllabus but a ‘framework’. This has had a major implication for its implementation.

This perspective is elaborated: ‘the focus is shifted from what is being taught, and the time allocated, to an emphasis on what individual students actually know, understand, value and can do as a result of teaching and learning programs they experience’ (*An introduction to the Curriculum Framework*, p.6).

Another distinguishing feature of the *Framework* is that the outcomes are to be achieved by all students, with variable amounts of time to be taken by different students in achieving them, rather than having a fixed time for teaching with variable outcomes.

Inevitably, therefore, the outcomes are highly generalised and are processes and skills oriented at the expense of content. As shown in the reports on the actual implementation of the *Curriculum Framework*, having variable time and fixing the outcomes proved troublesome in different ways.

The approach to implementation

At the outset, it was understood that implementation of the *Framework* would take some time: schools were given from 1998 until 2004 to do so. It was also anticipated that other publications beside the *Curriculum Framework* and *An introduction to the Curriculum Framework* would follow.

A review chaired by Alan Robson (2001) made recommendations regarding the substantial resources needed to implement the *Framework*, including creating structures in the Education Department. Many publications (for example, guidelines, overviews, 'getting started' manuals and suggested professional development approaches) were produced.

Many believe that this kind of implementation should be avoided in relation to future curriculum change.

RECOMMENDATION 1

THAT THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN ANY LEARNING AREA BE IMPLEMENTED ONLY WHEN IT IS COMPLETE.

Role of schools

In documents concerned with the *Curriculum Framework* and its implementation, it was evident that it was the role of schools and school leaders to translate the very general outcomes into teaching programs. This was seen as providing opportunities for schools to be flexible in the delivery of the kind of programs that would meet the outcomes requirements of the *Framework*.

The first term of reference

To review the *Curriculum Framework* for curriculum, assessment and reporting purposes in Western Australian schools, with particular reference to years Kindergarten to Year 10.

Curriculum

Advantages

Some of the advantages of the *Curriculum Framework* are that it covers all years and areas of schooling for the public and private sectors; it formalises learning as a progression from Kindergarten to Year 12; it provides links across the learning areas; it uses a common language across all the learning areas and phases of schooling; it is explicit about values; and it acknowledges the diversity of students, legitimising a variety of teaching strategies.

Disadvantages

The major difficulty that seems to permeate and govern the considerable problems in implementing the *Curriculum Framework* is that it demands a very highly-resourced school in the terms defined above. Apart from the larger metropolitan and some regional schools, which are highly resourced, most schools do not have the resources for the purpose.

RECOMMENDATION 2

THAT IN INTRODUCING THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM, IT IS NOT ASSUMED THAT ALL SCHOOLS ARE HIGHLY RESOURCED AND THAT THE RELATIVELY MODEST RESOURCES OF THE MAJORITY OF SCHOOLS BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IMMEDIATELY THE CURRICULUM IS IMPLEMENTED.

Most schools have not had the resources to translate the outcomes into a coherent set of syllabuses for the immediate implementation by teachers. The national curriculum is intended to consist of content and achievement standards. It is being developed year by year and will include elaborations with the intention that that all teachers can understand the requirements. However it is recommended that the Minister ensures that the national curriculum includes clear syllabuses. Where these may require further support materials, then these should be developed in Western Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 3

THAT EXPLICIT SYLLABUSES, INCLUDING CONTENT, BE DEVELOPED FOR THE LEARNING AREA COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM BEFORE THEY ARE IMPLEMENTED IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Assessment

The *Curriculum Framework* states that assessment should be valid, educative, explicit, fair and comprehensive. These principles are widely agreed upon and having them articulated is helpful as a point of reference.

In the Outcomes and Standards Framework (2005), each outcome in each learning area was described in terms of eight levels of increasing achievement. In particular, students' proficiency was assessed and reported directly as a level. This process has proved troublesome and has been abandoned in public schools. It will not therefore be considered further here, except to note that analytic marking of the more traditional kind is to be used.

Reporting

Assessment that was referenced and reported in terms of the eight levels created a conflict with assessments referenced and reported in terms of Year levels. The latter was seen as being more accessible to parents.

RECOMMENDATION 4

THAT REPORTING TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS BE REFERENCED TO PROGRESS IN YEARS OF SCHOOLING.

Another disadvantage of the professional language of the *Curriculum Framework* and the Outcomes and Standards Framework is that it is too opaque for general communication. A national imperative that students' reports include grades 'A' to 'E' is perhaps a reaction to reporting in terms of outcomes and levels.

RECOMMENDATION 5

THAT THE CURRICULUM COUNCIL ENCOURAGE SCHOOLS TO REPORT INFORMATION TO PARENTS AND STUDENTS THAT COMPLEMENTS THE GRADES 'A' TO 'E' IN A WAY THAT MINIMISES THE DEMAND FOR SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE EDUCATION PROFESSION.

The *Curriculum Framework* and legislative requirements

The *Framework* has seven principles of learning, 13 overarching learning outcomes, phases of development, functions of assessment and values. These are found in the first 39 pages of the original version and on the inside of the back cover. They arose from the National Declarations and are sufficiently general to accommodate any particular syllabus in the eight learning areas.

The *Framework* is capable of a wide range of uses, from being in the background to being in the foreground. For those schools that find its general principles and related statements useful, it need not be jettisoned.

RECOMMENDATION 6

THAT, NOT WITHSTANDING RECOMMENDATION 7, SCHOOLS MAY CONTINUE TO SET THEIR TEACHING OF DISCIPLINE AREAS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM WITHIN THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING, THIRTEEN OVERARCHING LEARNING OUTCOMES, PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT, FUNCTIONS OF ASSESSMENT AND VALUES DESCRIBED IN THE *CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK*.

It seems self evident that, with the advent of the national curriculum, the legislative requirement that the *Curriculum Framework* be implemented will have to be removed.

RECOMMENDATION 7

THAT THE LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENT THAT SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT THE *CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK* BE REMOVED.

This recommendation leads to the second term of reference.

The second term of reference

To advise on the relationship between the *Curriculum Framework* and proposed national curriculum.

There are three reasons why the developers might be able to produce an excellent national curriculum:

- they realise that they are responsible for the whole country;
- they have a greater pool of resources; and
- they can use the experiences of the States and Territories which, over the last two decades, have been implementing curriculum based on the National Declarations.

The curriculum, syllabuses, illustrative lesson plans, programs of teaching and learning, and materials for the assessment of learning, together with the relevant professional development, must be sufficiently well prepared so that even if the national curriculum was not mandated, schools would see it as so good that they would take it up voluntarily. That must be the operational criterion for the success of the national curriculum.

Background: The Interim National Curriculum Board

At the national level, the Board has been developing national curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Year 12. The development of continua of learning in literacy and numeracy will be a foundation for this work (www.acara.edu.au).

The first set of subjects to be developed comprises English, mathematics, science and history. It is planned that these will be implemented in schools in 2011, resulting from the programs being completed in 2010. They will be followed by geography, languages and the arts.

Finding clear and succinct ways to describe the curriculum

The language difficulties in the *Curriculum Framework* seem common among the States and Territories:

The form of presentation of the curriculum will be critical to its successful implementation. The experience of many users of curriculum documents in the various jurisdictions is that they are too long, complex, written in convoluted language, with ambiguous category descriptors in which it is difficult to identify key ideas.

(Interim National Curriculum Board, *National Mathematics Curriculum: Initial Advice*, p.12)

The role of content

One of the features of the general outcomes in the *Curriculum Framework*—outcomes that all students can achieve—is that they emphasise processes at the expense of content learning. The Interim National Curriculum Board is aware of this problem.

The Curriculum should make clear to teachers what has to be taught and to the students what they should learn and what achievement standards are expected of them. This means that curriculum documents will be explicit about knowledge, understanding and skills and will provide a clear foundation for the development of the teaching program.

(Interim National Curriculum Board, *The shape of the national curriculum: a proposal for discussion*, p.4)

However, the following paragraph leaves scope for various interpretations and is reminiscent of the *Curriculum Framework* approach:

The national curriculum will not be just a core around which other things will need to be developed by schools or systems. It will be complete in its specification but will allow for additions. There will be scope, as there is in State and Territory curricula, for teacher professional judgement about what to cover and in what sequence, about how to reflect local and regional circumstances and about how to take advantage of teachers special knowledge and teachers' and students' interests.

RECOMMENDATION 8

THAT THE EXPLICIT CONTENT TO BE TAUGHT BE PRESENT IN ALL CURRICULUM DOCUMENTS, AND WHERE IT IS NOT PRESENT IN ANY NATIONAL CURRICULUM LEARNING AREA, IT BE PRODUCED FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

The Interim National Curriculum Board has been absorbed into the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

The national assessments of progress in literacy and numeracy were put into place before any national curriculum existed. In addition, the results of NAPLAN are increasingly high stakes. One observation is that to the degree that there is not a national curriculum to Year 9, the NAPLAN tests will define that curriculum. Used constructively, NAPLAN results are an important adjunct to the information a school has about the learning of its students. However, they should not be the sole, or even the main, basis for assessing a school.

Competition and the use of NAPLAN

Publication of NAPLAN school results will create competition. Kept within rules or guidelines that can be enforced, competition can be a positive factor in focusing teaching and learning. Unbridled, it can be highly destructive, particularly when it shifts work from cooperation to competition, competition that generates suspicion, breaking rules, cheating and so on. Cheating may include teaching to the test in educationally-unhelpful ways.

RECOMMENDATION 9

THAT THE EFFECTS ON SCHOOL PROGRAMS OF THE PUBLISHING OF NAPLAN RESULTS BE MONITORED COMPREHENSIVELY AND INDEPENDENTLY.

Capacity of NAPLAN

Except in writing, NAPLAN tests are in short-answer or multiple-choice formats, lasting some 45 minutes. Although they provide an excellent adjunct to the assessment that schools carry out with their students, it is important that evidence from NAPLAN is not over-interpreted. At present, the results, including summary comparisons with other schools in the State and in other jurisdictions, are provided to Western Australian schools.

Since 2000, public schools in this State have participated in what is known as the ‘Data Club’, while Catholic and independent schools have engaged in a project known as ‘Numeracy and Literacy Data (NuLitData)’ since 2004 and 2005 respectively. Each year, researchers are given access to the data sets, aggregated to the school level, with the challenge of representing the data in forms that assist classroom teachers and specialists to make judgements about students’ progress and the effectiveness of their interventions, while principals are able to review this progress over time and across cohorts. The analysis includes comparisons with the State results as a whole and with ‘like’ WA schools and the effectiveness of ‘value-adding’ measures.

RECOMMENDATION 10

THAT THE CURRENT SUPPORT PROVIDED BY THE DATA CLUB AND NULITDATA PROGRAM FOR THE USE OF NAPLAN RESULTS IN SCHOOLS BE REINFORCED.

National curriculum and NAPLAN

NAPLAN tests can only assess the subset of the required learning of students. Therefore it is necessary to have a clear statement of all the learning that needs to be carried out so that, in the presence of other factors such as the competition mentioned above, NAPLAN does not become the de facto curriculum.

Resources of a school and NAPLAN

Schools that are modestly resourced may be forced to use the NAPLAN tests as a basis for preparing lessons. This is not ideal in relation to the teaching of content: the tests inevitably represent a sample of the required learning. Modestly-resourced schools need help to ensure that NAPLAN does not narrow their curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION 11

THAT, IN CONSIDERING THE NEEDS OF MODESTLY-RESOURCED SCHOOLS, THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN EACH DISCIPLINE AREA INCLUDE (OR OTHERWISE MAKE AVAILABLE) ILLUSTRATIVE SEQUENCES OF LESSON PLANS.

The third term of reference

To consider the impact of any proposed changes on teachers and schools in Western Australia.

Tired of change

A recurring reaction to the advent of the national curriculum is that the teachers are tired of what seems to be constant and relentless change.

Not everything in current approaches to teaching will need to change: indeed, much will not. This implies that the implementation of the national curriculum need not (and should not) create the impression of major changes to the *Curriculum Framework* in its general form.

There will be differences between schools, however, in relation to the extent they have previously emphasised process or content.

Professional development

The Interim National Curriculum Board has indicated explicitly that professional development relating to the implementation of the national curriculum will be the responsibility of the jurisdictions.

The Western Australian College of Teaching (WACOT)

One of the main functions of WACOT in registering all teachers in Western Australia is to ensure their ongoing professional development. At present, it seems to have a limited capacity to enforce professional development.

It has a recommendation in its recent submission to the government regarding the review of the *Western Australian College of Teaching Act 2004* that:

The Board recommends that the Act and its Regulations be amended to facilitate the College's capacity to influence the quality of the professional learning available to teachers.

This recommendation is taken to mean that WACOT should have the capacity to recognise specific professional development programs, and to articulate the kinds of learning that it would recognise. If this is the intention of this recommendation, and because professional development is so important, this recommendation is strongly supported.

Two areas of professional development require particular consideration: assessment, which is independent of any curriculum; and teachers' content knowledge.

Assessment

In the first term of reference, it was indicated that traditional marking keys are to form the basis for assessments. An integral part of analytic marking is the design of assessment tasks to consolidate learning, diagnose problems and summarise achievement.

RECOMMENDATION 12

THAT THE CURRICULUM COUNCIL CONTINUE AND EXTEND ITS SUPPORT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS IN CONSTRUCTING ASSESSMENT TASKS, ANALYTIC MARKING KEYS AND IN THE MULTIPLE USES OF ASSESSMENTS.

Content knowledge and teachers of students in years K-10

Three factors converge to make content knowledge an important theme in this report: the statement by the Interim National Curriculum Board that content will become an integral component of teaching and learning; the requests by teachers for detailed syllabuses; and the advent of NAPLAN testing, which has generated specific teaching programs.

Content in initial teacher education

Although greater content knowledge is needed by many teachers, especially the less experienced, in primary schools (and some in secondary middle schools), more content cannot be crammed into initial teacher education courses. Therefore continuing professional development in content (which is generally provided indirectly through the development of teaching materials) should be acknowledged as a significant need.

RECOMMENDATION 13

THAT THE NEED FOR CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTENT KNOWLEDGE IN THE LEARNING AREAS BE EXPLICITLY ACKNOWLEDGED.

Approaches to professional development in content

There are a number of excellent professional development programs that provide content knowledge indirectly. However, if this is to be delivered explicitly, it will be necessary to consider the best ways of doing so in consultation with teachers, especially those in the least-resourced schools.

RECOMMENDATION 14

THAT A PROJECT BE CONDUCTED TO ESTABLISH POTENTIALLY SUCCESSFUL FORMS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTENT AREAS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR TEACHERS OF K-10 STUDENTS.

A different approach is to capitalise on the infrastructure of universities to teach content. Teachers could enrol in relevant units for professional development that could contribute toward undergraduate or higher degrees, such as Master of Education.

RECOMMENDATION 15

THAT FURTHER STUDY FOR AN UNDERGRADUATE OR POSTGRADUATE DEGREE BE RECOGNISED AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CONTINUING TEACHER REGISTRATION.

In addition to its function as a requirement for registration, professional development should be encouraged and rewarded. It may be appropriate to have a salary increase associated with each additional relevant university degree.

RECOMMENDATION 16

THAT A SALARY INCREMENT BE GIVEN FOR EACH RELEVANT DEGREE, BEYOND THE INITIAL TEACHING QUALIFICATION, EARNED BY A TEACHER.

The national curriculum and initial teacher education

The Interim National Curriculum Board expects the introduction of the national curriculum to have an impact on initial teacher education programs.

University departments of teacher education prepare teachers for employment that includes placement outside the jurisdictions in which they are located but use their local contexts explicitly. For reasons of efficiency, effectiveness and successful school experiences for their students, they need to know the policies and requirements of the Curriculum Council, the systems to which the schools belong and the schools in which they place the students. In particular, they need to know the policies of the Department of Education and Training that affect all schools.

RECOMMENDATION 17

THAT A SIMPLE FORMAL STRUCTURE BE ESTABLISHED THROUGH WHICH TEACHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS IN UNIVERSITIES ARE INFORMED OF IMPORTANT POLICY DECISIONS THAT AFFECT SCHOOL PROGRAMS.

School experience

There are always concerns about the shortage of initial teacher education school experience placements. It is surprising, therefore, that there is no official requirement for registered schools that have the capacity to take these students to do so, nor is there any requirement that schools have formal support programs for students on placement.

RECOMMENDATION 18

THAT THE ARRANGEMENT WHEREBY SCHOOLS ARE NOT REQUIRED TO TAKE STUDENTS FOR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE BE EXAMINED.

Consideration could also be given to WACOT requiring experienced teachers to demonstrate the successful supervision of student teachers for continuing registration.

The first year of teaching

The first year of teaching can be overwhelming. This problem can be accommodated in a well-resourced school with few beginning teachers by means of reduced teaching loads and substantial mentoring. However, in a modestly-resourced school, this is not possible under current funding arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION 19

THAT FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS HAVE NO MORE THAN 80 PER CENT OF A FULL-TIME TEACHING LOAD.

How to introduce the national curriculum?

Different approaches to the introduction of the national curriculum in a learning area could include introducing it at the K level and then having those students progress with the new curriculum or introducing it throughout K-10 in the same year. Some combination of these two extremes is likely. In any case, consultation with schools is essential.

RECOMMENDATION 20

THAT SCHOOLS, ESPECIALLY THOSE MODESTLY RESOURCED, BE CONSULTED REGARDING THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE NEW NATIONAL CURRICULUM WILL BE INTRODUCED.

Relationship between the Curriculum Council, the education systems and ACARA

ACARA makes it clear that the implementation of the national curriculum and the professional development of staff will be the responsibility of the States and Territories. The jurisdictions have considerable expertise and it is inevitable that some of their resources will be used at the national level. However, that does not mean that current local expertise should be transferred to ACARA and lost to the individual States and Territories. This may mean that ACARA has staff located in jurisdictions other than New South Wales.

RECOMMENDATION 21

THAT THE STAFF OF ACARA IN SYDNEY BE KEPT TO A MINIMUM AND THE EXPERTISE IN THE STATES AND TERRITORIES BE RETAINED AND CONSOLIDATED.

Roles of the Curriculum Council and the Department of Education and Training

An inherent difficulty for all schools arises from the respective roles of the Curriculum Council and Department of Education and Training and for private schools, those of the Catholic Education Office or the Association of Independent Schools.

RECOMMENDATION 22

THAT IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM, THE RESPECTIVE ROLES OF THE SYSTEM BUREAUCRACIES, AND IN PARTICULAR THOSE OF THE CURRICULUM COUNCIL AND THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING, BE MADE EXPLICIT.

Nomenclature for the kindergarten year and the national curriculum

There is a difference between Western Australia and the national curriculum in the definition of what constitutes a 'kindergarten' year: Year K in the latter refers to this State's Pre-primary year. Therefore the national curriculum should not be extended to include K students in this State. However, the fact that K students are generally in schools in Western Australia complicates the issue.

RECOMMENDATION 23

THAT AN EXPLICIT POLICY BE DEVELOPED FOR THE APPLICATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA OF THE K YEAR OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM.

