



RESPONSE TO DRAFT ENGLISH K TO 10 CURRICULUM

This official response was produced following consultation with our membership in several ways. Members on our email list have received regular updates regarding the curriculum and have provided feedback to the Association. Another source of feedback was from participants at various ACARA forums, one of which was held in October last year at Edith Cowan University and another in March this year at the WACA ground. We have also obtained feedback via our association newsletter, our website and in letters. Most recently, on 12 May we held a discussion forum at which teachers from a WA trial school presented their experience to participants who then discussed key issues, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to the Draft English curriculum. The comments below are a synthesis of all feedback.

Strengths and opportunities

A curriculum for all States and Territories is a worthwhile initiative and one that deserves much discussion and re-drafting to ensure an enriching, but realistic and manageable English learning experience for all students, throughout their Primary and Secondary education.

While much time and effort is being given to the shaping of the Curriculum, all will be to little effect if equal time and consideration are not given to preparing teachers for its implementation. The Western Australian experience with implementation of new senior schooling WA Certificate of Education courses provides a poignant example of how poor preparation, professional support, resourcing and inconsistent communication will result in classroom experiences that bear little resemblance to the potential promised by curriculum documents.

The Strands

Language:

ETAWA supports the explicit teaching of language conventions including grammar, especially the emphasis on how the language works, as well as the development of a metalanguage to enrich student understanding.

While grammar has a place in English, there is a need to make apparent the purpose for which it is taught. Knowledge of grammar is a means to an end, not an end in itself, but the current structure of the Draft Curriculum suggests otherwise. Unless obvious links can be made between elements of grammar and how they are essential for effective listening, speaking, reading, viewing and writing, grammar will be taught with a checklist mentality along the same lines as has been the case already with the NAPLAN testing preparation.

Literature:

The degree of specification in the Language Strand is not matched by equivalent specification in the Literature Strand. There is scope for more precision in describing concepts, reading practices and textual forms that might be covered at each year level in the Literature strand.

Literacy:

Although we have no immediate concerns, there is potential for this and the other two strands to be treated in isolation from one another in an 'itemised' fashion, especially by teachers new to English teaching.

Content Descriptors and Elaborations

There is very little guidance as to what degree of importance should be given to each of the Content Descriptions. Some will be addressed quickly while others will be given much more time, often as a result of the degree of importance ascribed by the individual teacher, rather than from any indication of importance provided in the document itself.

The Elaborations are not structured in a consistent way. Sometimes examples are followed by essentials, and at other times essentials are stated first and are followed by examples.

Both the Content Descriptors and the Elaborations imply a highly didactic pedagogy, encouraging teaching-centred delivery rather than student-centred, enquiry based learning.

Literary texts

The broad range of literary texts (Australian, including contemporary, traditional and indigenous, world literature drawn from classic and contemporary) is important and acknowledged. It is, however, problematic to suggest that each of these categories of texts is to be covered in each year. This has the potential to lead to superficiality of treatment and a 'tick the box' approach. It would be more sensible to suggest a range of texts across a phase of schooling.

Any suggestion of prescribed texts, however, would completely undermine the integrity of subject English, which must have a focus on the way language operates in our world. The texts teachers select are the vehicles through which students come to an understanding of curriculum content, they are not the content itself. The provision of text examples could be inferred as being required rather than suggested. It is preferable to provide text types rather than text titles.

Viewing

Viewing is not explicitly outlined in the Content Descriptors and is 'absorbed' into Reading in the Achievement Standards. This suggests an alarming 'devaluing' of visual literacies at a time when the prominence of visual texts in our culture indicates their growing significance and authority.

The viewing component evident in the Draft Curriculum makes very little reference to symbolism or the manner in which power relationships can be represented, or to what is excluded or absent from a visual text. The significance of visual texts must be made more evident through a specific focus on visual literacies, which is comparable with that given to print literacies, and which extends from the early years into the middle secondary years where the examination of visual texts should be at the deeper level of meaning.

A truly 'futures' focused Curriculum should reflect the degree to which our culture is immersed in the world of visual communication as a natural part of all aspects of our life. The implied and perceived undervaluing of viewing by the curriculum is a retrograde step in the opinion of West Australian English teachers.

Overall Structure

One of the key features of a good English curriculum, according to Professor Peter Freebody, has to do with the need to achieve continuity of learning across the school years, and in so doing, avoid the itemisation or 'check list' approach to teaching.

A consistent structure that facilitates the reading of the requirements of a particular strand across several year levels is not evident in this Draft Curriculum. This is imperative, as it would indicate the developmental nature of language learning. It is also imperative that a consistent structure be obvious as teachers look at the details for adjacent year levels.

Of grave concern with regard to the structure of the English Curriculum, is the lack of any sense that language learning is developmental. There is a suggestion in the way content is organised into years that regardless of where students are on the learning continuum, they will be required to address the content of a particular year rather than content that will help them to progress. The absence of any obvious scoping and sequencing of content contributes to this impression.

In addition to this, the articulation of year-by-year Achievement Standards seems to further undermine any suggestion that the delivery of content is inextricably linked to identifying student needs and that these must be the starting point in the design and implementation of teaching-learning programs in all years.

Achievement Standards

There is an internal tension in the document as it stands. The content is organised into the three strands of Language, Literature and Literacy, but the Achievement Standards are organised by the modes of Listening/Speaking, Reading and Writing.

Furthermore, the year-by-year Standards against which all student achievement must be measured do not provide structures for mapping student progress, and will condemn lower ability students to perpetual low grades, regardless of any progress they may have made in their acquisition of language skills and understandings. Similarly, gifted students may always receive an 'A' even if they have not made great learning gains. There was widespread concern at the aspirational nature of the standards, which appear to be pitched too high. Trial schools have found them difficult to use when assigning students grades. The Standards read remarkably like outcome statements formerly used in this state, but without the degree of specificity they entailed.

General Capabilities

While all educators will acknowledge the importance of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum dimensions, how they 'sit' within the English curriculum must be given careful consideration. These dimensions of the Australian Curriculum must not be the drivers of the English curriculum. However, they should be accessed as widely as possible in order to enrich students' understanding of English concepts and skills.

Implementation

Is Year 7 in the Curriculum considered to be part of Primary or Secondary education? There are major issues related to transition, resourcing and professional development which are dependent upon knowing this. In WA this issue has the potential to cause significant problems. It seems nonsensical for something purporting to be a National Curriculum not to resolve this aspect.

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