



Cross-Curriculum Priorities & Geography

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Cross-curriculum priorities

The three-dimensional design of the Australian Curriculum includes the cross-curriculum priorities (CCPs), learning areas and general capabilities (GCs). While learning areas are deemed ‘what students need to know’, the GCs and CCPs indicate ‘what sort of people students ought to become’ (Lingard, 2018). This aligns with their rationale, articulated in the national narrative and aspirational goals of the *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). With the release of the latest iteration, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Council of Australian Governments Education Council [COAGEC], 2019), it is timely to revisit the rationale and application of the CCPs.

Encompassing the themes of Sustainability, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, these priorities are identified in Goal 2 of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) seeking ‘active and informed citizens’, that:

- understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians,
- are able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia, and
- work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments. (p. 9)

While their futures orientation positions these priorities in relation to time, they are also situated in place and space:

- nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures,
- regionally, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia is a ‘regional’ priority, and
- globally, Sustainability.

In the curriculum the CCPs do not exist outside of learning areas. Instead, the priorities ... add depth and richness to student learning in content elaborations. They will have a strong but varying presence depending on their relevance to the learning area. (ACARA, 2018, para. 2)

Nor do they exist as distinct dimensions of the achievement standards, or separately assessable elements of the curriculum.

Implications for implementation

This apparent contradiction, stated value in the future, but potential irrelevance regarding what is taught in the present, creates interesting conditions for the implementation of the CCPs, as does the absence of accountability via assessment or reporting. As Barry McGaw, previous Chair of ACARA notes ‘if you can’t define and measure, people won’t pay attention to things’ (Roth & McGaw, 2010, 0:40–1:50). While the measure is absent, the definition is not, though it is problematic.

The common thread across the CCPs is that they consist of ‘problems’ to be solved through implementation of the curriculum, as we ‘build’, to use the language of the Melbourne Declaration, our ideal society. And ideally, we agree. We agree that these phenomena are significant and want our students to be problem-solvers. However, ACARA present particular phenomena as problems alongside a particular way of thinking about them, implicitly suggesting that relevant content can be discretely identified and inserted into curriculum to neatly resolve such ‘problems’. This is common in policy; policy authors seek endorsement of policy as a ‘solution’ to a ‘problem’ (Bacchi, 1999). For example:

- nationally, nationally, we need to resolve discord and achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians,
- regionally, we need to resolve our lack of Asia literacy which prohibits engagement with Asian countries and markets, and

- globally, we need to resolve a looming Sustainability crisis presented by phenomena such as global warming.

The construction of the priorities as (optional) solutions to problems, rather than intrinsically worthwhile phenomena, exposes them to distinct vulnerabilities. Their presence in curriculum suggests that significant phenomena are being addressed, and more significantly resolved, via curriculum content. Yet despite overwhelming resonance in teacher responses that these phenomena are important, research indicates variable implementation of the CCPs as distinct curriculum elaborations in everyday teaching practice. For example, Sustainability is cited as 'neither a priority nor cross-curricular' (Barnes et al., 2017) and some teachers were 'unaware of its existence' (Nicholls & Thorne, 2017). Elsewhere, the transformative potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, is identified, however teachers are not confident in their attempts to realise them (Salter & Maxwell, 2015). By contrast, there are also instances where the rich potential of a CCP is recognised (see Heaton, 2019).

How 'relevance' is perceived more widely also contributes to vulnerability. The Federal Government's 2014 review of the Australian Curriculum framed the CCPs as requiring review, given concerns they were politically motivated inclusions, rather than pedagogically justified initiatives (Maude, 2014). Ultimately, this led to reduction of their documentation in learning area elaborations. The Mparntwe Declaration (COAGEC, 2019) may also signal further revision if, like its predecessor, it guides ACARA's decisions. Of particular note is a shift in Goal 2. While the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and Sustainability CCPs are still foregrounded, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia is not. In fact, there is no mention of Asia at all in the entire declaration. There is, however, a call for students to 'engage in the global community, particularly with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific regions' (p. 8). Perhaps 'Asia' is now irrelevant to Australia's preferred future? To what extent this may be a statement of geography, or a geopolitical statement, may emerge more clearly in the next version of the curriculum.

Geography

Geography teachers are uniquely positioned to address the CCPs through the subject's disciplinary focus on interrelationships between physical features of the earth with individual, social and political relationships. Unlike Science and Mathematics curricula, the Geography

Curriculum is considered a 'natural' place for all three CCPs to be embedded, by academics as well as industry (AGTA, 2014; Australian Government, 2014; Casinader, 2016). Research suggests that teachers also view Geography as a discipline within which the topics related to the CCPs can be logically addressed (e.g. da Silva-Branco, 2019).

However, for some the challenge to the stability of Geography as a distinct discipline is the greater priority. For example, as Australian governments increasingly focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in schools and industry, practitioners are contemplating benefits for the discipline and broader society of positioning Geography within STEM (Caldis & Kleeman, 2019). Given the potential for marginalisation of the subject in a context that suggests the humanities and social sciences are less lucrative than STEM subjects, it is germane to seriously consider Geography's disciplinary strengths and position (Dolan, 2019). However, it is important to do so cognisant of the ways in which such debates, which potentially pit 'hard' and 'soft' sciences against one another and the subjective and regional against the purportedly unbiased and universal, may leave content such as CCPs vulnerable to exclusion (Barnes et al., 2017; Lambert, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2006).

The manner in which the CCPs have been conceptualised and constructed and the current context in which curriculum decisions are made mean that we need to reflect on our practice and ask to what degree are the CCPs vulnerable – in my classroom, in my school, in my profession – and what does this mean for our students?

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