Redesigning Schooling

Principled curriculum design

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Contents

Introduction 2

Chapter 1 Why educate?.. 4

Chapter 2 What is curriculum?.. 7

Chapter 3 Principles of curriculum design............................... 15

Chapter 4 Applying the principles 41

References 45

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Introduction

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Since the release of the first national Australian Curriculum in 2010, many teachers, leaders and policymakers have assumed that because the government had specified what schools were required to teach, no further discussion of the issue of curriculum is necessary.

This belief is mistaken for two reasons. The first is that the legal framework of the Australian Curriculum specifies only what schools were legally required to teach – any school is entirely free to teach whatever it wishes in addition to the prescribed curriculum. The second is that the real curriculum – the lived daily experience of young people in classrooms – requires the creative input of teachers. For example, the Australian Curriculum may require that students learn about negative integers, but the kinds of analogy that a teacher might use to teach this topic (e.g. heights above and below sea level, temperatures above and below zero, positive and negative bank balances and so on) must be chosen with an understanding of the students, their experiences and a range of other contextual factors. So the real curriculum is created by teachers, every day.

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Curriculum development therefore takes place constantly in every school, but the lack of attention to this process means that it is rarely given enough time, is generally done by teachers working alone and tends to be done as an ad hoc activity. The aim of this booklet is therefore to help schools make curriculum development a planned and collegial process, and one that builds on the expertise of others. Every school's curriculum has to be, by definition, unique, but by using the ideas in this booklet, schools can adapt and build on the work of others to design a curriculum that will meet the needs of their students.

The first chapter addresses, briefly, the different reasons we have for educating young people.

The second chapter discusses how the idea of 'curriculum' has evolved over the years, drawing in particular on the work of Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba and Lawrence Stenhouse.

The third chapter shows why the development of the 'real' curriculum requires the involvement of teachers at each stage of the curriculum development process. It presents seven principles of curriculum design that need to be considered in the process, namely that a curriculum should be balanced, rigorous, coherent, vertically integrated, appropriate, focused and relevant.

The fourth chapter presents some ideas that schools can use with their teachers and other stakeholders (e.g. school leaders, students, parents) in the development process of curriculum redesign.

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Chapter 1
Why educate?

It is – just about – possible to imagine a world without schools. However, as Denis Lawton wrote:

> Certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance in our society but is entrusted to specially trained professionals (teachers) in elaborate and expensive institutions (schools). (Lawton 1975, p. 7)

The question that then arises is what kinds of knowledge, attitudes and values should be prioritised? Different authors have proposed different responses to this question, depending on what they conceive the purpose of education to be. However, it does seem that most of the justifications that have been made for mass public education can be grouped into four broad categories.

Personal empowerment: Arguably the most important aim of education is to allow young people to take greater control of their own lives, perhaps best exemplified by the work of Paulo Freire. The idea is that rather than

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simply enculturating young people into the existing systems, education is the means by which people 'deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Shaull 1970, p. 34).

Cultural transmission: Another reason that is often given for educating young people is, in Matthew Arnold's words, to pass on from one generation to the next, 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' (Arnold 1869, p. 70). Those who do not know what people are expected to know are regarded as ignorant – not stupid, but simply lacking the knowledge expected of them.

Preparation for citizenship: Democratic citizenship arguably works only if those who are voting understand the choices they are given, and education therefore has a vital role to play in preparing citizens so that they can make active and informed decisions about their participation in Australian civic life (MCEETYA 2010).

Preparation for work: As a number of reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have shown, more educated workers are more productive (e.g. Hanushek & Woessman 2010). Educational achievement is therefore inextricably linked with economic prosperity.

The important point about these four broad philosophies of education is that they are not alternatives from which we can choose our favourites. All are important and often in tension with one another, so that any education system is a – sometimes messy – compromise between these four sets of aims.

Finding an appropriate compromise between these different, and often conflicting, aims is made more difficult by the fact that the relationships

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between the categories of aims are not fixed but are in constant flux. A compromise that works effectively today is not likely to be the best compromise in the future. As the world becomes more complex, what is needed for personal empowerment today may be completely inadequate in the future. As new forms of culture develop, some will be incorporated into the mainstream, and so 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' will change. The knowledge needed to participate effectively in democratic society will also change over time as young people increasingly adopt and adapt their roles as global citizens. And as offshoring and automation change the kinds of employment opportunities available for young people, the kinds of preparation young people receive for the world of work will need to change too.

Any education system is made up of a number of components, including schools, teacher training institutions, assessment systems, governance arrangements and of course curricula. Each of these is important and can have significant impact on the performance of the system, but it is important to note that these components differ substantially in how difficult they are to change, and also in the size of the impact of any changes on student outcomes. In particular, while none of these components is easy to change, it appears that attention to the issue of curriculum has the potential to be one of the most powerful levers for improving the performance of the system.

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