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### **What if we had asked teachers to do the curriculum review?**

The Australian Curriculum describes what Australian children should know and do. The purpose of the recent review of the curriculum was to investigate whether the content of the curriculum was adequate. Was the content 'right' and was it the 'right amount'?

But the findings show a worrying lack of understanding of the components of the curriculum, and what teachers actually do in the classroom.

### **An overcrowded curriculum?**

One of the review's most popular findings is that there is too much content and the curriculum should be 'de-cluttered'. To achieve this, a key recommendation is to remove four of the seven general capabilities and the three cross curriculum priorities.

These ten themes cut across all the Key Learning Areas and across all grades. The seven general capabilities are Literacy, Numeracy, ICT capability, Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding and Intercultural understanding. The three cross curriculum priorities are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia and Sustainability.

If you haven't been a teacher in a primary school classroom - **and that would be everybody involved in the review and most of the media commentators** – then removing all of that seems a very logical step. It's a lot of stuff, so removing it would surely slim down the curriculum.

But the general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities are **not content**. The **content** of the Australian Curriculum is found in the seven Key Learning Areas of English, History, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Health and PE, Technologies and Languages.

The general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities are 'lenses' through which teachers look at content as they do their planning. They are not always applicable or relevant and there has never been an expectation they appear in every lesson or unit of work a teacher delivers. As the curriculum itself states

*They will have a strong but varying presence depending on their relevance to the learning areas.*

### **So, how do teachers plan?**

When planning, primary teachers consider the content descriptors from all their Key Learning Areas - and look for links between them. This integration strengthens learning because seeing something from more than one perspective builds a robust understanding of content and concepts. It's an interdisciplinary approach that often dis-integrates when students reach high school, and is lamentably long gone by the time they reach tertiary education.

When the content descriptors are selected, the teacher looks at them again through the lenses of the general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities. This alerts them to other perspectives they can incorporate into their content teaching.

Here is a brief example of how this works.

In Year 5 Science, two of the content descriptors are:

- Important contributions to the advancement of science have been made by people from a range of cultures
- The Earth is part of a system of planets orbiting around a star (the sun)

The general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities may prompt a teacher to explore the ways in which the night skies are understood and used by different cultural groups. (*Intercultural understanding: Explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices*)

For example, the use of the lunar phases by fishing communities around the globe, including Australia; the importance of the lunar movements in Islam and Orthodox christianity (e.g. prayer schedules and holy days are determined by the lunar calendar); the use of the lunar calendar in agricultural communities in south east Asia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders use of the night sky in navigation. (*Cross curriculum priorities of ATSI and Asia*)

Or teachers may be prompted to investigate the long history of scientific endeavour in astronomy from the ancient Greeks ('astronomy' is a Greek word - the laws of stars, as opposed to 'astrology' - words about stars) to Muslim scholars ('almanac', the guide to lunar movements, is an Arabic word and invention).

They may decide to organise content learning so students can share their cultural knowledge. (*Intercultural understanding: Communicate across cultures; Literacy: Use language to interact with others*)

Or they may set a task where different uses of the lunar phases by different cultural groups are investigated and presented. (*Intercultural understanding: Consider and develop multiple perspectives; Critical and Creative thinking: Imagine possibilities and connect ideas*)

The culminating assessment may measure content knowledge learned, alongside what they have learned about different cultural uses of scientific understandings. (*Intercultural understanding: Reflect on intercultural experiences, Empathise with others; Critical and Creative thinking: Think about thinking; Literacy: Compose spoken and written texts*)

Primary teachers are well used to this kind of integrated and interdisciplinary planning. It is complex learning design, and it is why you need a minimum 4 year Bachelors degree to teach. It is also why we need our cleverest people pursuing teaching as a profession.

### **How do we decide what to leave out?**

Removing the general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities won't de-clutter the curriculum - because the content remains. But it does mean we lose prompts to think deeply about the content.

The two curriculum reviewers acknowledge these capabilities and priorities have value and recommend they be placed in the 'relevant' key learning areas. Paradoxically, this recommendation increases the content of the curriculum rather than reduces it. It also misunderstands their purpose as threads that link content across the learning areas and across the grades.

Often, what you decide to give up is a better indication of your beliefs and values than what you decide to keep. It may be ideology that is driving the removal of the cross curriculum priorities and general capabilities, or it may just be a misunderstanding of how teachers convert curriculum content into classroom practice.

Either way, their removal doesn't de-clutter the curriculum. It does, however, reduce the opportunities to give our kids the kinds of dispositions and attributes employers say they lack.

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