Implementing the Australian Curriculum in Rural, Regional and Remote Schools, and Schools of Distance Education

“Fine...so we have the same curriculum...do we get the same resources...[as] our coastal and metropolitan counterparts?”
(Survey respondent)

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Introduction

The Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities is a university-philanthropy partnership formed and funded to address inequalities in educational opportunities for rural and remotely located young Australians. The Chair has a mandate to develop new directions in rural research, teaching, community engagement and policy development. Informing this is a belief that vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long term sustainability of Australia. Translating this into practice means that:

- people who live and work in rural and remote Australia must have access to high quality, relevant and affordable education, training and care at all ages and stages of life, and;
- it is essential that people who live and work in urban contexts and provide policy advice to governments, as well as those who design and manage programs intended to benefit country people and communities, deeply understand rural.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to report on what leaders of rural, regional and remote schools and distance education services say are the issues, challenges and opportunities of implementing the Australian Curriculum.

A detailed statistical report is also being prepared. If interested in obtaining a copy, contact details are as above.
Executive Summary

In June this year 233 leaders of rural, regional and remote schools, and distance education service providers, were invited to respond to an on-line survey about implementing the Australian Curriculum. 44 leaders or 18.9% responded which is comparable to typical response rates for online surveys.

While respondents recognised some benefits of an Australian Curriculum, many of the leaders who returned the survey have concerns about how they will lead and manage this reform.

Essentially, these leaders are asking for 4 improvements to assist them with implementing the Australian Curriculum:

- firstly, leaders want more information about the Australian Curriculum; there is a strong sense that consultation about implementing the Australian Curriculum needs to be increased

- secondly, rural, regional and remote leaders need sufficient resources to successfully introduce the Australian Curriculum; specifically this means funding, access to curriculum experts and time for teachers to work through what they have to do

- thirdly, leaders want implementation support which is responsive to rural and remote contexts and which recognises that many, perhaps most, rural and remote schools do not have a large pool of relief teachers who can release permanent staff for professional development sessions

- fourthly, leaders of distance education schools have materials production timelines which need to be factored into the implementation process.

Context

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the design and implementation of the Australian Curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12. The Australian Curriculum is being introduced to “equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century” (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008, as sourced from ACARA website, August 24, 2010, emphasis added).

Further, “[t]he national curriculum will be accessible to all young Australians, regardless of their social or economic background or the school they attend” (ACARA website, 24 August 2010, emphasis added). The commitment by ACARA to uniform implementation of a national curriculum across Australia means that the implementation of the new curriculum in rural, regional and remote areas must receive the resources and the services needed to ensure this commitment is translated into practice.

Rural, regional and remote schools, particularly those with small enrolments, multi-grade level classes and often significant numbers of relatively inexperienced staff, typically face many challenges when major changes in education have to be implemented (Anderson, Davis, Douglas, Lloyd, Niven & Thiele, 2010; Clark, Stevens & Wildy, 2006; Howley, 2002).
Participants

Participants for the research were identified through an Australia-wide network of rural and remote education specialists and the Australian Distance Educators Association. In total, 233 schools and distance education service providers were approached. While the number of schools invited to participate in the research was similar across states, the number of distance education service providers surveyed in each state and territory was more variable as there are fewer such providers, and a sample that included as many as possible was sought. The Australian Capital Territory was excluded from the research because it has no rural, regional or remote schools.

We received 44 responses representing an 18.9% response rate, which is comparable to typical response rates for online surveys (Kaplowitz, Hadlock & Levine, 2004). Responses comprised 35 from leaders of rural, regional and remote schools and 9 leaders of distance education services. Of the leaders who responded, 26 were female and 18 male, with a mean age of 50 years. School leader respondents had lived in country communities on average for 25 years and had worked in their current position for 4 years on average. Distance education service providers had supported rural, regional and remote teaching for an average of 18 years. From this it can be inferred that participants had considerable experience to draw upon when responding to the questionnaire.

Schools ranged in size from 10 students with 8 year levels to 682 students spanning reception to year 12; the mean enrolment of the group of school responses was 162. There were 16 responses from schools with less than 100 enrolments and 24 schools had secondary students. Distance education services ranged in size from more than 1,000 enrolments to 45; 3 had less than 100 students and were also dedicated to primary education.

Questionnaire

The ‘Implementing the National Curriculum’ questionnaire consisted of three main sections (see appendix 1). Section 1 focused on demographic information about the respondent and the school in which they worked. For school leaders, the first section consisted of fifteen questions on job position, gender, years lived in rural, regional and remote communities, school size, and other school characteristics. The first section of the questionnaire was modified slightly for distance education service providers, as several questions were less relevant, for example, ‘how many people reside in your local community?’, since distance education service providers are often located in urban areas and frequently serve a large geographical footprint.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on participant views about the implementation of the Australian Curriculum on a number of dimensions. Participants were presented with a statement and asked to rate how strongly they agreed with the statement. Ratings were sought on a seven point likert-type scale, with 1 representing strongly disagree, 4 being undecided, and 7 being strongly agree.

The third section of the questionnaire invited participants to write about challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of the national curriculum, what they require to successfully implement it, and anything else they would like to say about the implementation of the national curriculum.
Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis, a statistical technique which validates predicted factors, together with a detailed analysis of the written comments, were used to produce the findings.

Rural, regional and remote educational leaders have mixed views on implementing the Australian curriculum. While some can see clear benefits for students, teachers and communities, others are either sceptical about or opposed to it. Consistently, rural, regional and remote leaders assert there are very important matters which have to be addressed for it to succeed.

Key findings

The key findings from the survey are:

- adequate time has to be provided so that rural, regional and remote leaders and teachers thoroughly understand the Australian curriculum and what is required of them to achieve a successful transition to it.
- rural, regional and remote schools are concerned they do not have adequate resources to implement the Australian curriculum.
- rural, regional and remote educational leaders want more consultation in their areas to ensure there is equity of effort, and their communities are not marginalised by the implementation of a national curriculum.

Information

Lack of information feeds into both the perceived difficulty of the task, and views about the importance of implementing a national curriculum. As well, lack of information appears to be exacerbated when principals report being satisfied, indeed very satisfied, with their present curriculum framework. Evidence in support of this includes “...the [current] curriculum framework...is an excellent document that covers all aspects of the curriculum...whereas the only drafts I have viewed of [the] national curriculum have been learning specific and very skeletal”; “[it] would appear that the national curriculum is a return to content driven learning rather than skills driven...like the proposed History Curriculum [which] will not allow versatility”; and the Australian Curriculum “will mean going back to discrete subjects in discrete blocks of time when we have progressed to a much more integrated way of working in schools”. One respondent wrote at length about how the national curriculum does not support child centred learning, while another wrote that it offers “very little for remote teachers” and that “this curriculum is a backward step- a back to basics approach really- not an embracing about what is possible”.

Resources and time

A lack of resources for implementing the national curriculum was mentioned in 58 comments by respondents. Included here was time for staff to read and familiarise themselves with what they have to do and, linked with this, securing sufficient relief teachers so permanent staff can be released for in-service sessions. “Limited [relief teachers] to provide necessary professional development”—this succinctly summarises a major issue for leaders of rural and remote schools and one that respondents are indicating needs to be addressed to enable them to successfully implement the Australian Curriculum.
The issue of resources and time, especially the importance of adequate lead time to develop new on-line and print based resources, seems to be particularly acute for schools of distance education—“all learning resources will need to be rewritten to accommodate the new curriculum...while at the same time [continuing to deliver] relevant curriculum to [current] students”.

*Place matters?*

For some rural, regional and remote educational leaders, the implementation of the national curriculum is raising debate about how curriculum should be designed and for what purpose. Evidence of this can be ‘heard’ in the following quotation:

“The National Curriculum has two voices—the first recognises the developmental needs of learners... [t]he second voice is dogmatic and dictatorial... [and] demands all students will master/accomplish/know and understand specific concepts/skills according to a calendar/timeline”.

Further, the perceived return to a greater emphasis on content is being interpreted by some leaders as reducing their capacity to design learning opportunities that are responsive to *local* issues and interests— “…in small, rural and remote areas it is extremely important that curriculum content is relevant and based on what the students know and have experienced”. As well, there is some concern there will be insufficient teacher expertise “to deliver specialist learning” thought to be required for the national curriculum, but presumably not required under present curriculum arrangements.

Another way of representing the concerns leaders have about the Australian Curriculum squeezing out time and ‘permission’ to incorporate locally based learning in the missions of their schools, is diminishing the significance of place based learning. The essence of place based learning is *place matters*, or perhaps put more realistically from the perspective of the day to day life and work of a school leader, place can matter if one is attuned to the possibilities it has to inform and shape learning. Places are replete with ‘messages’ from the natural, built and socially constructed worlds. As Gruenewald (2003) argues, “places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (p.621).

A valid interpretation of the concerns of leaders about the balance between global and local learning opportunities being progressed through the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, is that the tilt may have gone too far towards addressing preparation of students for life as global citizens. This reading is not a call to ‘turn back the clock’ or to deny that education is quintessentially mobile capital. Rather the reading is one that argues rural and remote places and spaces are rich and fertile in terms of designing curriculum and learning for the preparation of young people for ‘the future’. Put another way, will the Australian Curriculum contribute towards a continuation of deficit thinking of rural and remote contexts when it comes to high stakes matters like national curriculum, or will it help turn this tide? As stated earlier, place matters, places teach us and places make us:

Deficit framing focuses on what is absent in a context, what is unavailable, rather than what is present, what is available... The opposite, non-deficit framing... is a preparedness to think and function recognising the value of ‘what you have rather
than what you wished you had’. In educational leadership terms for example, do rural leaders construct their roles around a view that rural schools and rural communities essentially lack what is available in larger cities and contexts, or do they construct their leadership essentially with a pro-active framing? As argued by Danaher, Danaher and Moriarty (2003, p.135), it is important “to challenge the orthodoxy that conceives of educational experience in non-metropolitan areas in deficit terms”. It is also critically important for rural educational leaders to challenge the view that the continuing decline of rural contexts is ‘an inevitable fact’. (Halsey, Elford Lecture, 2009)

**Benefits**

In contrast to the aforementioned challenges identified by participants, respondents to the survey also identified benefits likely to flow from the implementation of the national curriculum. For most distance educators and some school based leaders, the possibility of achieving greater uniformity of curriculum across Australia is seen as a benefit. One respondent wrote that “consistency with transition from state to state and from school to school” is a significant plus. Another respondent commented that the national curriculum presented an opportunity for achieving “seamless curriculum”, while another claimed the national curriculum may encourage teachers if they focus on “HOW to teach rather than WHAT to teach... to become more strategic and more expert in their pedagogical decision-making and their classroom practice”.

**Summary**

Participants were both specific and consistent about what they, as educational leaders, require to implement the national curriculum. Sufficient time to deeply understand the Australian Curriculum and its implications for rural, regional and remote students and families, is a major priority. So too are adequate resources and implementation support that are ‘rural and remote friendly’. To optimise professional development of staff, leaders would like to see better regional coordination of activities, as well as enhanced access to on-line resources.

Clarity about the expectations of implementing the Australian Curriculum is also being sought as encapsulated in this comment from one school leader—“clarity of process and expectation, an understanding of what resources we can access (how much, when) what is the assessment philosophy/practice [and], [a] commitment that the thing will be around for 10 years!!!” In other words, rural leaders would like to feel that the effort they are going to put in to implement the Australian Curriculum will have lasting results.

The task of managing the transition from the curriculum leaders are currently responsible for to the national curriculum, is also an issue for some. Leaders have lived through numerous curriculum changes and are concerned that the Australian Curriculum will be implemented only to be replaced by a future government initiative.

There are benefits in having an Australian Curriculum, and as one respondent wrote, “it is a wonderful idea and should have happened years ago... I am so excited to be part of it”. While this view and enthusiasm is not shared by all respondents, the benefits include an opportunity to ensure that families who move frequently in search of employment and for other reasons are better served than at present. An Australian Curriculum may also enhance opportunities for all
Implementing the National Curriculum in Rural Australia

young Australians and provide an opportunity to “thrive and compete in a globalised and information rich workplace of the current century”.

However, from the questionnaire data, it is also the case that the implementation of the Australian Curriculum may further devalue place and approaches to teaching and learning which strive to incorporate it. This would be a real tragedy because place—the local—is a powerful informer of places—the global. Neither is sufficient in and of itself. Each is required and the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is a unique opportunity to advance teaching and learning shaped and informed by both.

References


APPENDIX 1

Section 1

1. Position held in your organisation:

2. Please select one of the following: Female ☐ Male ☐

3. Postcode:

4. Please indicate your age (in years):

5. How many years have you lived in a rural, regional or remote community *(please tick)*:
   - Less than 5 years ☐ 5 years ☐ 10 years ☐ more than 10 years ☐

6. How many years have you been employed in your current position *(please tick)*:
   - Less than 5 years ☐ 5 years ☐ 10 years ☐ more than 10 years ☐

7. How many full time equivalent administrative staff does your school have?

8. How many full time equivalent teachers does your school have?

9. How many students does your school have?

10. How many grade levels does your school have?

11. How many classes does your school have?

12. Does your school have a formally designated second in charge staff member?
   - Yes ☐ No ☐

13. Does your school have anyone else who is officially appointed as a leader to help implement the national curriculum? Yes ☐ No ☐

14. Approximately how many people reside in your local community?

15. Approximately how far is your nearest regional centre? ___________ kms
Section 2

Please rate your agreement with statements 16 to 31 by checking ONE box from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

16. It is a good idea to implement a national curriculum.

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17. I am concerned about implementing the national curriculum.

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18. It will be easy to implement the national curriculum.

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19. It is not possible to regulate the national curriculum.

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20. I have sufficient resources to institute the necessary changes for the national curriculum.

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21. The national curriculum does not allow for the importance of local knowledge.

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22. The national curriculum will marginalise rural, regional and remote schools.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree

23. The national curriculum will increase the mobility of students away from their community.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree

24. Rural, regional and remote teachers know what impact the national curriculum will have on their workload.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree

25. Rural, regional and remote parents know what impact the national curriculum will have upon their children’s learning.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree

26. It is important that all schools teach the same curriculum.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree

27. Implementing the national curriculum in my school will be a lot of work.

- Strongly Disagree
- Undecided
- Strongly Agree
28. More support is needed in rural, regional and remote schools to implement the national curriculum.

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29. My teachers know what is needed to teach the national curriculum.

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30. Autonomy about how the national curriculum is implemented in rural, regional and remote schools is important.

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31. There has been adequate consultation with rural, regional and remote communities about the national curriculum.

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Section 3

32. What challenges, issues, or disagreements do you have or anticipate in relation to implementing the national curriculum?

33. What opportunities for improving the learning of students and the professional satisfaction of teachers does the national curriculum provide?

34. What do you as a leader and manager of a school require to successfully implement the national curriculum?

35. Is there anything else you would like to say about the national curriculum and your school?