

**A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE STATE OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AT THE PTC - 14 SEPT 2011**

**By Katherine Saunders (VADEA Executive)**

On Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2011, eight VADEA Executive members attended a meeting at the PTC in Leichhardt to discuss the state of the Australian Curriculum with ACARA representatives. The discussion was driven by five key speakers representing key stakeholders from across Australia: Rob Randall (General Manager of Curriculum, The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority), Carol Taylor (Chief Executive of the Office of the NSW Board of Studies and Chair of the Australasian Curriculum and Assessment and Certification Authorities), Terry Gallagher (Acting Assistant Director of the Australian Curriculum Branch at the Queensland Studies Authority), Chris Melican (Manager of the Curriculum Support – The Australian Capital Territory) and David Howes (General Manager of the Curriculum Division of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority). Representatives from a range of professional teaching associations were in attendance.

Rob Randall opened the discussion by summarising the history of Australian Curriculum development in this iteration, and orientating the audience with recent developments in shape paper writing. He emphasized the ideals of 'equity and quality', and explained that **ACARA will write the curriculum but states and territories will be responsible for managing pedagogy and assessment**. While Rob's rhetoric alluded to a cohesive future direction, the details of his presentation pointed to the tension between the states and territories and how they will be affected differently by a curriculum that has the potential to in some cases reduce standards instead of raise them. Rob spoke often of 'entitlement', the idea that students are entitled to a broad education, as if they currently are not. While his rhetoric paints a sunny picture of diverse opportunities for learning, the reality is that the ACARA's curriculum proposals remain very content heavy in some subject areas, such as History where content has been increased while hours have been cut. **In other subjects, such as Visual Arts, descriptors for learning have been translated into an almost foreign language preoccupied with a vague notion of aesthetics**. In fact, Rob's diagrams highlighted one of the most unsatisfying and offensive aspects of the proposed National Curriculum – the prioritisation of some subjects and a decrease in hours for others. This favouritism undercuts any ideal of 'equity' and will maintain discrimination in the way elective subjects have been increasingly hybridised, diluted, and squeezed out of the allocated hour's debate. Keynote speakers talked of the 'attractiveness' of elective subjects, such as Visual Arts and Design. However, the reality is that the National Curriculum has trivialised and sidelined subject areas in the second and third writing phases, and has yet to even take some subject areas into account at all.

Carol Taylor spoke on behalf of New South Wales, and drew from her experience as an English teacher and a curriculum assessment developer. While Carol's clear understanding of New South Wales syllabus content and structures was refreshing and encouraging for the audience, her alignment with ACARA points to a gradual submission of state priorities to a national agenda. **Carol called for the development of outcomes, resources and support before New South Wales will consider accepting ACARA's curriculum proposals. Without these crucial frameworks in place, the Australian Curriculum will decrease the high quality of current New South Wales curricula**, and therefore arguably decrease teaching standards in our state. Carol referred to the effective use of outcomes based pedagogy in NSW, and stressed the significance of outcomes for affective learning and assessment. At this stage, ACARA's Shape Paper for The Arts explores what students may do in each subject area to a limited degree, but it does not grapple with conceptual frameworks for understanding the Visual Arts other than the aesthetic. **ACARA needs to work on developing the rationale because at this stage what is proposed lacks lustre and belies the value of the Visual Arts in education**.

Beyond aligning curriculum content with the Standards for Teaching and Learning, Carol detailed the importance of slow and steady development of curriculum structures and content. **It was most encouraging to hear Carol defend the high quality of the current NSW curriculum, and call for a National Curriculum that must meet or supersede the current curriculum before it is respected or accepted by NSW educators. Carol implored the audience to engage in consultation, encouraging them to advocate for thorough, transparent consultation throughout the development process**. At present, ACARA's curriculum is at odds with the New South Wales Education Act including the curriculum requirements for mandatory and elective courses.

While other states and territories are 'early adopters' with the Australian Curriculum, **Carol explained that NSW has no plans to adopt or implement anything until 2014 at earliest. This is still dependant on the quality of the National Curriculum, and whether it meets or extends on the standards of current NSW syllabi.**

Terry Gallagher, in contrast, outlined the ways Queensland teachers have been prepared for implementation of the National Curriculum. It was alarming to hear Terry speak with great ease about the way teachers in Queensland have been encouraged to adjust their programs and implement National Curriculum content despite its current draft status. It would be interesting to know how Queensland teachers feel about the direction to start implementation. Terry explained that in 2012 Queensland teachers will plan, teach, assess and report in English, Maths and Science using the Australian Curriculum with the help of the QSA (Queensland Studies Authority). Queensland is apparently 'highly supportive' of ACARA's activities. Terry explained this support stemmed from a romantic 'Marxist withering away of the state' to prepare for a greater national good. QSA are supporting the implementation as soon as possible, and encouraging Queensland educators to exercise 'professional prescription' and 'informed professionalism'. In general, Terry painted an optimistic impression of Queensland's enthusiasm to adopt ACARA's curriculum.

Chris Melican represented the smallest jurisdiction, the Australian Capital Territory. She spoke generally about the history of curriculum development in the ACT, where assessment and leaving exams have until now been the responsibility of Principals within the ACT. In fact, up until 2003, there was no specific ACT curriculum and instead schools managed all curriculum content and assessment. While this is a foreign concept to NSW educators, Chris was keen to describe the way schools have been able to tailor curriculum content according to context. Like Terry, Chris was keen to convey the ACT's eagerness to implement the National Curriculum: there already nine ACT schools documenting their journey as test sites for implementation. ACT educators have already enjoyed a pupil free day to discuss ACARA's National Curriculum, and will benefit from PD days for each subject area. What ACARA proposes may offer more stability, and possibly a more systematic way for the ACT to scrutinise its teachers. In contrast, ACARA's proposals are at odds with the quality of current NSW syllabi and many of the practices used by teachers in teaching their subjects.

David Howes spoke on behalf of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. He entertained the audience with a recount of his daughter's holistic educational experience, which saw her engage in group work outside of the classroom for a term. While attempting to charm, David's story circumvented the nitty gritty details of ACARA's proposed curriculum reform in Victoria. He downplayed the tension that will inevitably ensue in the states attempting to align content, achievement standards and practices during this negotiation process. His distractions did not build confidence in current processes, and the questions that followed revealed the acute awareness of informed educators in the audience that his representation might be viewed as 'a snow job'.

During the question time Rob's responses circled around finding the 'common denominators' between states and territories, and ACARA's willingness to 'take risks' in order to reach an average. Rather than abating the alarm of audience members, the proposed damage to current curriculum models seemed to escalate. **Rob has at times waxed and waned in his definitions of 'quality' and 'equity' in relation to the benefit of the Australian Curriculum for students and for educators. He went so far as to concede that ACARA was 'reasonably challenged' in their first version of the draft shape paper for The Arts, while acknowledging that there are vastly different 'customs, practices and histories' in each states and territory.**

**The same questions remain: if ACARA approaches the writing and of the Arts curriculum in the same way it has the development process, will the costs really outweigh the benefits? More significantly, who will pay the cost and who will benefit?**

This opportunity to openly discuss the current state of the National Curriculum would not have been possible without the Professional Teachers' Council NSW. Many thanks to President of the PTC NSW, Mathew Bentley, and Executive Officer Kim Tsolakis for making such an informative event available to NSW professional associations. Thanks also to Professor Shirley Alexander for chairing the event.

**VADEA 2011 CONFERENCE - K-6 WORKSHOP PHOTOS**

This year workshops, at the 2011 VADEA Conference, allowed for the sharing of ideas and a chance to create.

Our dedicated Art & Design Workshops for K-6, were led by outstanding art & design specialists, these workshops explored ideas linked to the K-6 Visual Arts Syllabus.

- Kristen Murray's *environmental*, sustainable recycling workshop was about sculptural problem solving. We discovered how to use preloved knitted materials as the basis for making sculptures in the K-6 classroom.



- Rhonda Burgess led *In Focus*, which looked at Photography as an art form. We used photography and magazine pictures as a means to focus on an area of personal interest.



### Primary VADEA members we want to hear from you!

Please feel free to submit any ideas, great lessons or units you would like to share with other members on our website.

Please forward them to: [contact@vadea.org.au](mailto:contact@vadea.org.au)

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VISUAL ARTS AND DESIGN EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

