

## **LEADING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: A CASE FOR RESEARCH**

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### **Introduction**

This article makes a case for research to be conducted into how leaders at the local school level are implementing Australia's first national curriculum, the challenges and enablers they are encountering in leading this implementation, and the role of professional development in supporting such implementation. According to Gerrard et al. (2013), the Australian Curriculum represents a significant intervention in educational practice and governance and thus provides a unique opportunity to research changing systems and school-level practices involved with large-scale curriculum reform. While there has been research into large-scale educational reform in other areas (see, for example, Bishop & Mulford, 1999; Ford, 2012; McCormick & Ayres, 2009), presently there is limited research in this particular area of curriculum change. This is not surprising given the recency of this implementation since 2012 in most states and territories. Although literature on national curricula of other countries may offer some insights into the leadership of implementing a national curriculum in Australia, it is argued that the idiosyncrasies of the Australian context suggest local research is required. The findings of local research will contribute to knowledge in the field of school leadership and curriculum change, with specific reference to national curriculum reforms.

### **The idiosyncrasies of the Australian context**

Since Federation, the Australian Constitution has shaped the education landscape in this nation. Under the Constitution, states have legislative power in education in accordance with Section 51. The Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory are also treated like states because of their large population (Australian Government, n.d.). Thus, each state and territory is able to pursue its own education policy agenda and have its own education system that comprises three school sectors – government, Catholic and independent. These contextual layers in which school leaders operate are likely to influence the strategies that they use and present challenges and/or enablers for them in implementing the Australian Curriculum.

Section 51 of the Australian Constitution has proven to be a constraint for the Commonwealth government in introducing its plans for a national curriculum (Henderson, 2009). This tension across Commonwealth and state/territory policies for education has been evident for many years and has been a significant impediment to national governments seeking to influence what is essentially a state responsibility. Importantly, however, Australia's first national curriculum has been made possible because Federal Labor governments have been able to gain support for this curriculum from the states and territories. There is no guarantee that this support will continue given the political realities of Australian federalism whereby newly elected state or territory governments can withdraw such support. Similarly, a federal government of a different political persuasion than currently might take a different position to pursuing a national curriculum. This highly politicised context has implications for the future of the Australian Curriculum. School leaders thus are endeavoring to lead major curriculum reform in their schools while at the macro level a range of uncertainties remain.

While states and territories have responsibility for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the development of this curriculum is the responsibility of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent statutory body (ACARA, n.d.-c). ACARA (n.d.-b) expects the implementation of Phase One subjects (Math, English, Science and History) to be under way across the country in 2013, however, not surprisingly given the tensions noted above, different approaches and timelines are being adopted by the states and territories in implementing these subjects. For instance, New South Wales has delayed implementation until 2014, so that it can develop its own P-10 syllabi for Phase One subjects to give NSW-expression to the Australian Curriculum content description (ACARA, n.d.-a).

The complexities of the Australian context as discussed here add to the ever-present challenges for school leaders in driving significant change as they seek to implement the national curriculum. These challenges include dealing with resistance to change, and affecting cultural aspects of the school, such as teachers' beliefs, values and motivation, to be more conducive to change (Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 2007, 2008). Research that investigates how school leaders lead the implementation of the national curriculum within the Australian context should generate important findings that are both idiosyncratic to Australia as well as contributing to the extant literature on large-scale school reform.

## ***A gap in the literature***

To date, writings in the area of the national curriculum in Australia have focused on the development of the Australian Curriculum and associated curriculum documents such as shaping papers and syllabi (see, for example: Atweh & Goos, 2011; Atweh & Singh, 2011; Aubusson, 2011; Brennan, 2011; Doncon, 2010; Gilbert, 2011; Haeusler, 2013; Harris-Hart, 2010; Henderson, Allan, & Mallan, 2013; Reid, 2011; Webster, 2013). This is not surprising, particularly given that the implementation of this curriculum has only recently commenced. Some of these writings have nevertheless raised some concerns about the implementation of this curriculum and the need for research in this area.

Reid (2011) has described the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum as a “nasty case of policy-catch” (p. 33) whereby problems have “emerged as a result of the tendency to simplify complex issues or to construct policy without adequately consulting the profession – so too are there hastily constructed responses which seek to paper over the cracks” (p. 33). A question that arises here is whether school leaders and teachers will have had sufficient time to adequately interpret the policy catch-up developments to the curriculum in order to effectively implement it. Brennan (2011) also argues that “[o]n the educational front, the overcrowding of specified content, its specification at age levels, and the disjuncture between content assessment and pedagogies do not bode well for providing practical and well-resourced support for teachers” (p. 259). The emerging concerns arising from critiques on the development of the Australian Curriculum question the readiness of schools to effectively implement the national curriculum. Presently, little research has been conducted on whether such factors raised by Brennan (2011) and Reid (2011), which are idiosyncratic to the Australian Curriculum and national education system, have impacted upon the efforts of school leaders in implementing this curriculum at the school level.

Recent studies by Drummon, Halsey, and van Bredar (2012) and Willis and Adie (2013) have focused on the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. Drummon et al. (2012) investigated understandings held by school leaders of rural, regional and remote areas in 2010 regarding the implementation of this curriculum. The study found that adequate time and resources were considered by these school leaders as important for them and their teachers to effectively understand and successfully implement the Australian Curriculum. Willis and Adie (2013) investigated the use of achievement standards by a sample of nine teachers across three Queensland independent schools in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. In this study teachers were found to experience difficulties in understanding the year level requirements; how to collect evidence of A-E standards; and how to report these requirements. Finally, Willis and Adie (2013) identified that learning through supported professional conversations with peers, and a shared assessment discourse as being significant to support teachers in their efforts to implement new practices in the achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum. Whilst these two studies have focused on the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, they have not investigated the role of school leaders in the actual implementation of this curriculum.

## ***National curricula of other countries***

There appears to be limited research on the role of school leadership in the implementation of national curriculum in other countries. For instance, much of the literature on the national curriculum of England, which was legislated by the 1988 Education Reform Act, pertains to how teachers view this curriculum, its impacts on their curriculum work and the challenges they faced in implementing it (see, for example: Daugherty, 1997; Hughes, 1997; Phillips, 1993; Russell, Qualter, & McGuigan, 1995; Silvernail, 1996).

A study conducted by Germeten (2011) investigated the principal’s role in implementing a national curriculum reform in Norway. Through surveys, interviews and classroom observations, Germeten (2011) concluded that principals require extra mentoring, as well as new tools to support them in implementing curriculum reforms. Another study conducted by Sofou and Tsafos (2010), which examined pre-school teachers’ views of the new early childhood curriculum that was enacted in 2003 as part of Greece’s national curriculum framework, found that almost all of the eleven teachers interviewed from the metropolitan area of Athens experienced a lack of appropriate guidance and professional development to work with the new curriculum framework. These studies have clearly highlighted the role of professional development in implementing a national curriculum reform.

## ***Concluding comments***

It is clear that there is limited research on the leadership of schools in implementing the Australian Curriculum. Given the diversity of schools that operate within the Australian education system, school-level research across the different school sectors that critically investigates how school leaders implement the Australian Curriculum, the challenges and enablers they encounter in leading this implementation, and the role of professional development in supporting such implementation, should provide rich data that can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the leadership of schools in implementing a national curriculum. The findings of such research could contribute to future policy decisions in education and to policymakers’ awareness and understanding of some of the key issues and challenges facing school leaders in implementing large-scale curriculum reform. Moreover, these findings could contribute to a better understanding of the curriculum leadership role of school leaders within globally changing times and may provide useful insights into contemporary roles and responsibilities of school leaders. Finally, research conducted within the Australian context would add to the international literature relevant to the implementation of national curricula of other countries.

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