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Drama in the Australian National curriculum: decisions, tensions and uncertainties.

Madonna Stinson* & John Saunders

Abstract:

In September 2015, the Australian Federal Government endorsed the final version of the Australian Curriculum arts framework a document resulting from nearly seven years of consultation and development. *The Australian Curriculum: The Arts Version 8.0* comprises five subjects: dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts. This article considers the curriculum development process and highlights interplays between decisions and decision makers. Now available for implementation in each State and Territory of Australia, the nature and structure of the framework remains in question with regard to what aspects of the curriculum will be supported for implementation in each State. At the time of writing, not one State education authority has guaranteed that the curriculum, as written and in full, will be implemented. As a result Drama remains outside the educational entitlement for all children in Australia.

Keywords:

curriculum, drama, arts curriculum, curriculum design, national curriculum, Australian curriculum

Introduction

In 2008 Australia embarked on the journey towards a national curriculum. Any task of this nature must be considered to be both complex and sensitive. In the current global educational climate with a focus on 'back to the basics', and decisions driven by economic (rather than educational) imperatives, combined with the tendency to "narrow, fragment and trivialise the enacted curriculum" (Luke 2010) it is comforting to see the study of drama finding a position in the national Australian curriculum as an area of entitlement for all Australian students. Instead of writing about the content, orientation and focus of drama in the Australian Curriculum we have chosen, in this article, to concentrate on the lengthy process of curriculum development in this national context, including the extensive consultative process.

In July 2013, the Australian Federal Government endorsed the draft of the *Foundation – Year 10 Australian Curriculum: The Arts*, after five years of development and intensive consultation. A further two years of consultation led to the release, on 21 September, 2015 of the complete (and final draft), Version 8.0, now available on the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website¹. For the first time it appears likely that learning in The Arts (including drama) will be made accessible for all students in the compulsory years of schooling, within Australia, regardless of circumstances or location. In this curriculum framework drama is presented as one of five Arts subjects, each of which holds equal weighting. Australian schools traditionally have offered music and visual arts and both these subjects are well established in the public consciousness. However the newly published framework (ACARA 2014) describes desired and intended learning in dance, drama and media arts in addition to music and visual arts. While in the past, some State-based education authorities have implemented arts curriculum in all five areas the national inclusion of drama (and dance and media arts) has raised concerns about an overcrowded

¹ <http://www.acara.edu.au/arts.html>

curriculum, teacher preparedness, and the need or desire for all the arts to be included (APPA November, 2014).

In this article, we explain the decisions made in relation to the curriculum development process for the developing drama curriculum framework, considering the tensions that emerged and the uncertainties that remain.

The national and international context

Australia is a country of contrasts. One of our well-known national poems talks of “droughts and flooding rains” (Mackellar 1908), strong and lived metaphors which resonate for all Australians. Other contrasts abound. With a relatively small population of only 24 million (52nd in the world), the landmass of Australia is the 6th largest country in the world, spanning from the tropics in the north to the icy southern ocean. Despite the common conception of Australia as a largely rural continent, 89% of the population live in urban areas, and in contrast to pronouncements of some right-wing commentators, 28% of Australia’s population was born outside Australia. Each of these contextual details have implications for any curriculum development process, including:

- the economic challenges of providing equity of access to a “world-class curriculum” (ACARA n.d.) for a small population in a large and diverse landscape;
- designing a relevant curriculum that connects to the lived experiences of young people in diverse physical and economic locations;
- designing a curriculum of relevance to the multicultural nature of the Australian population, including the First Peoples;
- and in the process, making decisions of what constitutes “worthwhile knowledge” (Hlebowitsh 1999/2004, 267) for the young people of today.

In Australia education has, until recently, operated under the jurisdiction of each state and territory. Until Federation in 1904, each Australian State was an independent government. Federation brought about many changes, including the establishment of a national government but State governments retained governance of the portfolios of Education, Health and Transport, amongst others. Consequently each State government developed and still operates a distinct education system, with separate schooling stages, nomenclature, curricula, and assessment practices. There have been several attempts at delivering a national curriculum in Australia (Reid 2005), but none, to date have been successful in fully developing and implementing a national curriculum, for the most part due to changes of government at a federal level. The latest attempt emerges from the *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) devised and agreed to by all state education ministers and their federal counterparts at the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) council meeting.

The *Melbourne Declaration* asserted:

The curriculum will enable students to develop knowledge in the disciplines of English, mathematics, science, languages, humanities **and the arts**; to understand the spiritual, moral and aesthetic dimensions of life; and open up new ways of thinking. (MCEETYA 2008, 3, emphasis added)

As a consequence of this very evident support for arts curriculum, arts educators throughout the nation, drama educators amongst them, celebrated and began to activate to ensure that the Arts did, indeed, secure a space in the Australian curriculum landscape as an entitlement for all children. And so, the curriculum development process began, with the appointment of John O’Toole as the lead writer in 2009. This appointment heartened drama educators even more since John is renowned for his experience, expertise and commitment to drama curriculum development.

The golden chalice of drama being included in a compulsory and nationwide curriculum, with implications for student access, teacher education and school resourcing came at a time when the status of drama seemed to be under threat in other countries. In her column for *The Guardian*, Patrice Baldwin noted that “the future of drama in schools in England looks disturbingly bleak at the moment” (Baldwin 2012, p. 1). In this article she was responding to Michael Gove’s decision to judge schools on their performance in the English Baccalaureate subjects which, in turn, has resulted in courses being withdrawn or failing to recruit enough students:

The most commonly withdrawn subjects are drama and performing arts, which had been dropped in nearly a quarter of schools where a subject had been withdrawn (23%) followed by art (17%) ... (Baldwin 2012, p. 1).

Such a predicament seems particularly ironic in a nation that has offered so much in terms of quality theory and practice to drama educators worldwide. The negative impact on drama in the UK has been exacerbated by the decision to cut drama from the subject, English, including the speaking and listening framework.

As other articles in this edition illustrate, the position of drama education in curriculum contexts is still relatively sparse and uncertain, though we can be encouraged by its consolidated position in New Zealand, Ontario, Ireland and Northern Ireland, Iceland and Finland (see Baldwin, 2012).

Developing the curriculum framework

In the early stages of the development of the *Australian Curriculum: the Arts*, there was initial excitement that the Arts had been recognised in the second phase of subjects to be developed (Phase One subjects included English, Mathematics, Science and History; Phase Two subjects included The Arts, Geography, and Languages; Phase Three subjects included Health & Physical Education, Information & Communication Technology, Design & Technology, Economics, Business, and Civics & Citizenship).

As we see in this article, Australia has invested heavily in both human and financial resources during the long process of development of the Arts curriculum. Curriculum decisions relating to “legitimate” (Apple 2004, Doll 1993) or “valid” knowledge (Bernstein 2000) have been driven by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA), established by the, then, Labour government in 2008. However the design of the national curriculum has been criticised for “‘the missing step’ – the development of an overarching curriculum framework that would underpin the development of the learning area and subject content.” (Donnelly and Wiltshire 2014, 2). The lack of a coherent framework considering current research into the nature and role of education, theories of how children learn, and what knowledge is important to the Australian context has hampered curriculum designers in each of the learning areas. It has meant that, for each learning area developed, the writers have designed the curriculum in line with current or traditional practice in individual discipline fields, often driven by a fear of losing rigour or quality, and the capacity to make connections across the various learning areas has been hampered. Each developed or developing curriculum guide has focused on the knowledge of specific individual areas, including an increased emphasis on “knowing how to do things” (Yates and Collins 2010, 89). Yates and Collins expressed concern about how rarely “knowledge” was part of the talk about curriculum when they interviewed senior Australian curriculum actors.

Michael Apple has pointed out:

The study of educational knowledge is a study in ideology, the investigation of what is considered legitimate knowledge . . . by specific social groups . . . at specific historical moments. (Apple 2004, 43)

In the sections that follow we will share with you the “legitimate knowledge” that has been included in the drama curriculum for Australian students at this point in our history. But first we will outline the process of consultation and development undertaken over many years to produce the Australian Curriculum: The Arts.

Negotiations and negotiators

The inclusion of The Arts in the Australian Curriculum was largely a result of sustained lobbying to the federal Government by a range of individuals and organisations. Most importantly the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE) a network of Arts representatives from the five arts subjects of dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts (mainly professional teaching associations) was especially active and influential in securing the Art’s inclusion in the curriculum. The NAAE gained traction with the, then, Federal Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts (and former lead singer of the Midnight Oil), Peter Garrett. It was as a result of the NAAE’s lobbying to Garrett that he made strong representation to the, then, Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard (later the first female Prime Minister of Australia) and to MCEETYA that The Arts were introduced into the second phase of development of the Australian Curriculum. (Gattenhof 2009)

The NAAE established and communicated a clear and consistent agenda: that all five Arts subjects are equally valuable and should be a mandatory part of the Australian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 10. Bringing individual educational professional associations together and agreeing on a shared agenda has not been an easy task. Many associations have state and territory chapters who hold their own views and lobby independently with contrasting or contradictory views.

The ‘Shaping’ Phase of the drama curriculum

To begin the process of Arts curriculum development ACARA invited a reference group of nationally recognised arts educators to assist in the writing of a position paper that defined the arts, considered how the curriculum should be organised conceptually, This group provided advice about relationships to arts subjects in non-compulsory years of schooling, and relationships with other learning areas. Following the publication of the position paper prepared by ACARA, Professor John O’Toole, inaugural chair of arts education at the University of Melbourne was commissioned to write the arts’ ‘initial advice paper’ which was made public at a national forum in May 2010. This document provide the basis for a ‘shape’ paper which described a possible conceptual framing of a single curriculum that encompassed five arts subjects. John continued with the drafting of the “Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts” throughout 2010, and consultation on this document was undertaken between October 2010 and January 2011 (ACARA 2011), coinciding with end of year assessment and reporting timelines in many Australian schools, a problematic time for quality consultation. The ‘shape’ paper provided indicative hours for each band (grouping of year levels) for The Arts as a group of subjects, as well as defining the scope of curriculum content by incremental bands. An online questionnaire produced 1600 responses, and an additional 166 detailed written submissions were received. The consultation process for ‘the Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts’ was open, democratic and transparent, to the credit of ACARA’s leadership, despite the short timelines, and State and National subject associations were included in the submission list.

The Shape Paper promoted the key principle of ‘entitlement’ to each of the five Arts subjects for all students from Foundation to Year 8, i.e. from 5 – 12 years of age (ACARA, 2010, p 10). For first time in Australia such an entitlement was declared. Prior to this point, curriculum opportunities in the Arts were evident in the policy

materials in each state and territory; however, access to quality Arts education (particularly in primary schools) was associated with socio-economic advantage (Pascoe et al. 2005, Davis 2008). For the first time this curriculum was to offer the potential for all children to have access to consistent and comprehensive learning in each of the five Arts subjects throughout their primary school years and the first two years of secondary school.

Writing the draft curriculum involved another nine months of collaboration and cooperation. At this point the discipline expertise of Drama Australia and its associated State professional associations and their memberships proved crucial. They provided fine-tuned feedback on the content and developmental levels of the curriculum-in-progress. The first complete draft was made available for consultation between June 2012 and September 25, 2012. The curriculum writers moved away from the academic rationalist stance (Vallance, 1986) with its focus on specifying canonical content, and instead concentrated on statements about levels of skills and understanding to be demonstrated by students at particular stages of their schooling. These are called achievement standards and went through a process of validation through a series of cross-checking workshops with teachers and drama curriculum experts throughout the country in February 2013 and were refined throughout the intervening months until July 2013. Many versions ensued. The final draft (Version 8) was endorsed for full implementation in every state and territory and published in September, 2015..

The process, while long, thorough, and certainly consultative, has not been without criticism. Some commentators have suggested that the timeframe for consultation was inadequate, allowing only short-term responses and limiting substantive conversations about pertinent and meaningful issues. In addition, “concerns were raised about equitable state and regional access and participation” (Atweh and Singh 2011, 2). The latter concerns relate to the nature of representation on ACARA advisory committees where impactful and strategic decisions are made. Membership is restricted both in terms of numbers and representation. So, we are reminded of one of the key questions to be raised about curriculum: who gets to decide? In Australia’s case the representation at a national level was drawn from recognised high status individuals and groups. As such, there was little opportunity for an ideological or epistemological shift and, indeed it seems, a perpetuation of the status quo.

How the Australian drama curriculum is organised

Drama, in the Australian curriculum, is one of five subjects considered to be “related but distinct art forms” (ACARA 2014, 6). Drama is defined as, “the expression and exploration of personal, cultural and social worlds through role and situation that engages, entertains and challenges” (ACARA 2014, 44). The content in the curriculum is deliberately left open, with no prescription of specific texts or dramatic forms and styles. Thus the planned and enacted curriculum in schools is very much in the hands of teachers, with teachers and schools enabled and encouraged to create courses of study and units of work that are appropriate for their school context and responsive to student needs and interests.

Organisation of learning is described under the two strands of Making and Responding:

- **Making** includes learning about and using knowledge, skills, techniques, processes, materials and technologies to explore arts practices and make artworks that communicate ideas and intentions.
- **Responding** includes exploring, responding to, analysing and interpreting artworks. (ACARA 2014, 7)

In both strands, teachers are advised to provide learning experiences which allow students to experience and consider a range of viewpoints or perspectives through which artworks can be explored and interpreted (e.g. societal, cultural, historical, as

an artist, as a performer, or as an audience). The curriculum structure in Drama delineates when to introduce and how to explore elements of drama; principles of narrative (story); viewpoints (how drama is approached in different roles); forms, skills, techniques and processes; and, materials (ACARA, 2014) rather than providing explicit content required to be studied in each band.

The sequence of learning is described in five levels: Foundation to Year 2, Years 3 and 4, Years 5 and 6, Years 7 and 8, and Years 9 and 10 in an attempt to allow learning to deepen consistently and over time. As Figure 1 shows, content in the first 3 levels (for primary or elementary schooling) is further divided into three strands, which contribute to the making and sharing of dramatic art works.

From Year 7 (the first year of secondary school in most States), students can begin to select and specialise in one or more Arts subject, depending on the specialisations offered within the school. It is at this point we, drama educators, begin to be concerned, as it is often a school-based decision as to which of the five arts subjects (Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music, and Visual Arts), remain on the timetable and be resourced within the school program. The junior secondary years become years of specialisation, with greater specificity of content and increased complexity in the descriptions and achievement standards.

[insert Figure 1]

To try to see the building of knowledge and complexity in the curriculum we will look at just one of the strands.

[insert Figure 2]

The developing of drama knowledge in this substrand of content builds from understanding developed through participation in spontaneous and improvisatory forms, through playbuilding processes to the interpretation and devising of increasingly complex scripted and student-created drama.

The achievement standards are indicated in levels matching the bands of schooling as you can see below: (ACARA 2014, 47, 50, 54, 58, 62):

Foundation to Year 2 Achievement Standard

By the end of Year 2, students describe what happens in drama they make, perform and view. They identify some elements in drama and describe where and why there is drama. Students make and present drama using the elements of role, situation and focus in dramatic play and improvisation.

Years 3 and 4 Achievement Standard

By the end of Year 4, students describe and discuss similarities and differences between drama they make, perform and view. They discuss how they and others organise the elements of drama in their drama. Students use relationships, tension, time and place and narrative structure when improvising and performing devised and scripted drama. They collaborate to plan, make and perform drama that communicates ideas.

Years 5 and 6 Achievement Standard

By the end of Year 6, students explain how dramatic action and meaning is communicated in drama they make, perform and view. They explain how drama from different cultures, times and places influences their own drama making. Students work collaboratively as they use the elements of drama to shape character, voice and movement in improvisation, playbuilding and performances of devised and scripted drama for audiences.

Years 7 and 8 Achievement Standard

By the end of Year 8, students identify and analyse how the elements of drama are used, combined and manipulated in different styles. They apply this knowledge in drama they make and perform. They evaluate how they and others from different cultures, times and places communicate meaning and intent through drama. Students collaborate to devise, interpret and perform drama. They manipulate the elements of drama, narrative and structure to control and communicate meaning. They apply different performance styles and conventions to convey status, relationships and intentions. They use performance skills and design elements to shape and focus theatrical effect for an audience.

Years 9 and 10 Achievement Standard

By the end of Year 10, students analyse the elements of drama, forms and performance styles and evaluate meaning and aesthetic effect in drama they devise, interpret, perform and view. They use their experiences of drama practices from different cultures, places and times to evaluate drama from different viewpoints. Students develop and sustain different roles and characters for given circumstances and intentions. They perform devised and scripted drama in different forms, styles and performance spaces. They collaborate with others to plan, direct, produce, rehearse and refine performances. They select and use the elements of drama, narrative and structure in directing and acting in order to engage audiences. They refine performance and expressive skills in voice and movement to convey dramatic action.

It is not possible, due to the space limitations of this article to give a thorough description of the content and knowledge considered essential in the drama curriculum, however we hope that the brief delineation of content and standards above allows you to infer the nature of the designed drama curriculum, and to understand something of the proposed development in student learning over the schooling span.

Political changes, remaining tensions and uncertainties

As Michael Apple, Henri Giroux and others have pointed out:

No curriculum development process can be seen to be independent of the political situation at the time. (Stinson 2009, 181)

And, the current situation in Australia bears this out. Changes of government at federal (September 2013) and state levels within the country have led to uncertainty with regard to the status of the arts curriculum.

The incoming Liberal Government appointed a new Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, in 2013. One of Pyne's first actions as Education Minister was to initiate a review of Australian Curriculum. Such a decision is nonsensical since the curriculum is on only part way through development and no curriculum areas had been implemented for any substantial length of time. Nevertheless, the new Education Minister appointed Kevin Donnelly and Kenneth Wiltshire to review the 'robustness, independence and balance' of the Australian Curriculum.

Donnelly and Wiltshire's (2014) review outlined thirty general recommendations for the overall curriculum and seven recommendations pertaining to The Arts. Most concerning was:

Two of the arts strands should be mandatory and we recommend music and visual arts. The other three strands should be elective subjects and schools would choose which to offer according to their resources and wishes of the parents and nature of the school context. (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 219)

This recommendation runs completely counter to previous decisions and consultation and, if accepted, will jeopardise the position of drama in the Australian Curriculum, while retaining a privileged position for music and visual arts. Unfortunately such a possibility seems to be supported by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA), which has expressed concern about the 'overcrowded curriculum' and pointed out that the process of curriculum development has allowed subject advocates to territorialise allocations:

We argue that subject-based writers and advisers in each area engaged in – whether intentionally or unintentionally – a claim for territory. (APPA November, 2014, 6)

This claim was reinforced within the Review report:

It was also apparent that many stakeholders believed the curriculum has far exceeded any nominal time allocations that curriculum writers may have been given. One strongly argued reason was that this was due to the many compromises ACARA made to accommodate the very vocal advocacies of some groups about the essential nature of content relating to their discipline. The arts curriculum was particularly singled out in this regard. (Donnelly and Wiltshire 2014, 3)

The review also recommended that Media Arts be removed all together; that the content in each of The Arts subjects be reduced; and that Drama should be covered in the English curriculum, and Dance in the Health and Physical Education curriculum. We yet, may be sharing Patrice Baldwin's concerns from earlier in this article.

Uncertainties remain about the status of the entire curriculum. APPA has criticised the subject-based approach to curriculum development pointing out that secondary specialists, who rarely see opportunities for learning to cross over disciplinary boundaries, drive such a conception of knowledge. They have also expressed concerns about teacher-preparedness to teach The Arts, reporting that "over 64% [of teachers] said they could not deliver all five Arts strands" (APPA November, 2014, 6). Clearly there is a need for pre-service teacher education in The Arts, however in February 2015, the Federal Education Minister released a review into teacher education (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group 2014) suggesting that primary generalist teachers should be required to specialise in one of the following areas; Mathematics, Science, Languages. Drama and The Arts were not mentioned.

Implementation –and yet there is hope

Despite the Review of the Australian Curriculum, most states and territories are moving ahead and preparing to implement The Arts curriculum after investing heavily in resource development to support teachers. As an example, the Queensland Department of Education has employed a team of fifteen writers to prepare teaching and professional learning materials to support teachers to implement The Arts curriculum. In addition the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) has invested heavily in the creation of on-line resources to support school planning and implementation. These resources, including video examples of arts practice, are freely available on the QCAA website: <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/prep-arts.html>

The Department of Education in Western Australia has decided to take an "adopt or adapt" approach, and while it is unclear as to what this might actually mean, it is comforting to see that drama and the arts remain on the agenda. There is little concrete information available from other States and Territories. However, nationally, there has been a significant effort to democratise access to quality Arts planning and teaching. The Arts POP (Packages Of Practice) website (<http://www.artspop.org.au/>) holds detailed plans of units of work, and teaching advice, developed by leading Australian arts educators. Scootle (<https://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/p/home>) links directly to the

Australian Curriculum website and provides an extensive array of materials and resources which is constantly updated. All of these resources are freely available. Drama Australia and its' affiliated State Associations are mobilising to develop resources and professional learning opportunities for their members. Professional associations will continue to play a key role in the implementation of The Arts and Drama curriculum throughout the country.

Final remarks

The Australian Curriculum: The Arts has been lauded internationally e.g.:

The Australian arts curriculum could be considered as exemplary in the international context in terms of the breadth of its scope, the considerable attention to defining its own language, and the lengths it goes to in recognising the differences in abilities and learning opportunities at the different age/grade levels. It considers the importance of the arts in the roles they may play in other parts of the general curriculum: literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, cross-cultural and environmental awareness, social and ethical development. (College Board for the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2011)

Still, uncertainty remains about the Federal Government's intentions and, indeed about the Federal Government itself, since we have a new Prime Minister and Minister of Education as a result of a sudden and fraught leadership change within the Liberal Party. Many drama educators hold no conviction that the prepared materials will be implemented in whole or in part throughout the country. The issue of **entitlement** for all students to a comprehensive Arts education seems to have been sidelined once again.

However there have been some positive outcomes of the review of the Australian Curriculum and the uncertainty provoked by political change. One certainly is that arts educators throughout the country have come together to fight collectively for their rightful place in a national curriculum. Even with some stakeholders voicing concern about quality, the collective voice of Arts educators passionate about the important place of The Arts in the curriculum is humming in the ears of policy makers, Ministries and ministers. When the idea of losing The Arts in a national curriculum became a real fear, petty and minute disagreements and concerns became irrelevant and were sidelined in favour of a shared goal.

We know the value of an education in drama. We understand how much it contributes to a sense of identity, to community and to culture. We are aware that a quality education in drama is cognitively, emotionally and physically challenging and rewarding. We see the importance of empathy, of hope, of imagination and of agency for our students, now and in the future. And we know that the work we do in drama takes educators and students, their families and communities beyond the basics and into a responsive and ethical world of possibilities. Drama is essential knowledge for the 21st century.

Allan Luke's prescient comments are relevant here:

The test of this national curriculum – and its affiliated policy settings around assessment, funding and teacher professionalism - will be whether it sets the conditions for yet another 'back to the basics' movement – with the potential to further narrow, fragment and trivialize the enacted curriculum - or whether it succeeds in focusing systems', bureaucrats', teachers' and teacher educators' and, ultimately, students' conversations on matters of intellectual demand, cultural meaning and substance, disciplinary and communities' content

knowledge, ideas traditional and radical, and on an exploration of the complex and critical issues, designs and knowledges for new economies and risky worlds. (Luke 2010, 64)

At the time of writing the arts curriculum has been endorsed at a Federal level and is now available for full implementation, but as we have suggested the degree of support for implementation is variable at best. We would claim that drama educators in Australia are already in tune with Luke's challenge above, and are continuing to engage in discussions about "intellectual demand, cultural meaning and substance, disciplinary and communities' content knowledge", and so on. Drama in education in Australia will continue to hold true to its principles and direction, with or without support at a government level.

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