

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA)

Date Received: 9 August 2020

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Sunday 9th August 2020

Dear Committee Members,

I write as President of the Primary English Teaching Association Australia and as Chairman of the Board of Directors. Please find attached our submission to the Inquiry into the NSW School Curriculum. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide input to the processes of this important work which will impact on teachers and students across NSW.

Our submission has been prepared by a group of member experts, names and positions are detailed in the submission. Please note that we would be pleased to discuss its contents further in person if requested.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Jones (President)

Response to the Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum (PETAA)

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) takes this opportunity to make submission to the Inquiry into the contents and proposed changes to NSW school curriculum. PETAA is well placed for this task as it is a longstanding national body with over 3000 members including 1833 individuals and schools from NSW. For almost 50 years, PETAA has provided curriculum support to teachers of English and literacy in primary and middle school years through professional learning events, high quality publications and advocacy.

While this submission is relevant to the terms of reference to the Inquiry, in doing so it will address elements of the Masters Curriculum Review (hereafter MCR). As such, we find that there is a number of worthwhile aspects of the Review that we endorse. Equally, there are aspects that are matters for refinement and for further consideration. In preparing this response, we have also consulted the *NSW Government Response to the NSW Curriculum Review Final Report* (NSW Govt Response).

We offer some general comments first with respect to the teaching of subject English and the national curriculum, and then will address the Inquiry TOR as relevant to the PETAA remit.

Nature of subject English and its relationship to literacy

Subject English, according to the Australian national curriculum for English, is a body of knowledge about **literacy**, **language** and **literature** that builds across the years of school from foundation or kindergarten to year 12. This tripartite conception of subject English brings together the work of teachers of English from the early years through to secondary years in a distinct and coherent discipline. It is a major achievement of the national curriculum, resulting from extensive consultation with teachers, teacher educators and academics.

With respect to **literacy**, the national curriculum describes the ever-expanding repertoire of talking and listening, composing and interpreting skills which Australian students require in order to tackle the increasingly complex and specialised subject areas, including English.

The Australian Curriculum: English also - for the first time in two generations - mandates the explicit knowledge about **language** (including grammatical knowledge at the level of sentence and whole text) that will enable students to bring these literacy skills under more conscious control.

And importantly, the national English curriculum foregrounds the place of **literature** from the earliest years, as a major means through which students come to learn about themselves, each other and the world. However, in contrast to this rich, disciplinary distinct conception, English is too frequently presented in the MCR and the NSW Govt Response as restricted to reading and writing (and occasionally oral language). We stress that English is not the same as literacy although English syllabus carries major responsibility for young people's literacy development.

Further, the view of literacy presented in the MCR and the NSW Govt Response does not reconcile with the more contemporary view of the national curriculum in which literacy is seen to involve 'students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts' (ACARA, 2020).

Literacy in the MCR and NSW Govt response is restricted to reading and writing as 'basic skills', with a heavy emphasis on reading while oral language development is restricted to the service of

early reading development. While we recognise the importance of good foundations in terms of oral language, alphabetic knowledge and other early literacy skills, contemporary theories of language and literacy tell us that these alone are not sufficient for school literacy success (Cox et al., 2019).

The NSW curriculum also makes clear the distinction between English and literacy, as might be expected since it includes all the content of the Australian Curriculum, from Foundation to Year 10. Literacy, “a synthesis of language, thinking and contextual practices through which meaning is shaped” which “involves interactions in a range of modes and through a variety of media” (NSW English K-10 Syllabus, Volume 1, p139), is important to all subjects; it is a cross-curricular general capability, not a subject. English, however, is a subject that involves “the study and use of the English language in its various textual forms” (NSW English K-10 Syllabus, Volume 1, p13), especially quality literature. Clearly there is more to subject English than literacy.

This response recognises that recent political and media focus has been on deficit models of literacy and that this has given appetite to ‘a back to basics’ focus on English literacy. We are determined to not wind back the clock on practice and thinking in NSW and Australia around subject English. Subject English is about growing knowledge, skills and appreciation of the aforementioned, interrelated strands of English in students, which is built on as students progress through the grades.

NSW curriculum/syllabuses and the Australian Curriculum

The relationship between the NSW *syllabuses* and the national *curriculum* is in urgent need of clarification, particularly in light of concurrent review of national curriculum. The existing NSW English Syllabus K-10 itself is a major overhaul of the Australian Curriculum: English with the result that content has proliferated and many teachers report that it is unwieldy to navigate. Further, it diverges so much from the national document that NSW teachers are disadvantaged with respect to accessing curriculum support materials written for national audiences.

In fact, this clarification could profitably extend to developing a coherent relationship between the NSW English syllabus, the Australian Curriculum: English, the National Literacy Learning Progression, and NAPLAN.

We now turn to addressing the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

TOR 1 The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including:

(a) Curriculum content, flexibility and pedagogy

PETAA Response:

Separate syllabuses for the early, middle and senior years will be challenging for maintaining the ‘continuity of learning’ envisaged in the Australian Curriculum English. The current K-10 and Years 11-12 syllabuses in NSW correspond with the F-10 and Years 11-12 organisation of the Australian Curriculum: English. Such continuity ensures that there is better alignment between English learning in primary and secondary. Furthermore, any move towards an “untimed” approach to student progress in learning will be significantly complicated by separate syllabuses in early, middle and senior years.

Traditionally, the ‘middle years’ are thought of as Years 5 to 8, but in the NSW Govt Response, they appear to extend from around Years 3 to 10 – a very length stage which does not recognise the transition into the distinctive disciplines of secondary school (along with cognitive, social, emotional and maturational changes).

With respect to 'untimed' syllabuses, it is difficult to see how these will work logistically. We recognise that students progress differently through syllabus outcomes and the staged nature of existing syllabuses enables teachers to cater for different progressions. Implementing 'untimed' syllabuses' assumes that additional, targeted support will be available for those students who have 'gaps', yet much of this additional support (e.g. Reading Recovery) has been stripped away from schools in recent years. Schools are attempting to differentiate for all learners in mainstream classrooms, often drawing on tiered learning approaches and instructional leaders working with small groups of students to lessen achievement gaps in English.

The emphasis on *strong foundations* in literacy (and numeracy) in early years is welcome and a key part of PETAA work. We agree wholeheartedly with the emphasis on oral language as a key component of literacy development, as literacy is said to "float on a sea of talk" (Dwyer, 1989). We also agree with the need for detailed description of what successful reading and writing looks like across the stages of schools and across curricula areas. However, the content of the proposed syllabuses for the early years is not clear other than the mention of play, movement and music - which are important activities for all young people. Becoming literate necessarily involves using those skills for different purposes; that is, reading, writing and talking must be 'about something'. At school reading and writing is 'about' education knowledge from across all curriculum areas: young learners acquire literacy by studying quality literature, the natural world, exploring local communities, examining the past, and so on. Therefore, we would expect that there be clear content related to curriculum areas, including but not only English and Mathematics, in the syllabuses for the early years.

(b) Quality and relevance of the evidence-base underpinning the recommendations

PETAA Response:

Beyond the somewhat limited 'expert' studies cited in the MCR, there is a *significant evidence base* supporting the focus on key concepts and deep understanding in different learning areas. The Quality Teaching model (NSW DoE, 2003a) introduced in NSW schools in 2003 and still widely used in NSW and ACT schools, strongly supports the focus on substantive knowledge and literacy practices of curriculum subjects and is underpinned by a rigorous research base (NSW DoE, 2003b). Wiggins and McTighe (2005) argue that teachers across all disciplines need to plan for learning experiences that promote deep understanding of the key concepts of their subjects. In a more recent article, they affirm the importance of higher order concepts, insisting that education "consists of more than a pile of facts or a laundry list of skills" (Wiggins and McTighe, 2008, p37). These findings resonate with the work of Bransford et al (2000) who maintain that "organizing information into a conceptual framework allows for greater transfer; that is, it allows the student to apply what was learned in new situations and to learn related information more quickly." More recently, Wiliam (2013) has argued that "one of the key steps in designing a curriculum ... is to be clear about what the 'big ideas' for the subject are".

(c) Recommendations for student-centred 'progression points' and 'differentiated learning' in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proven to be effective

PETAA Response:

The issue of what constitutes *progression* in curricula is vexed as the research evidence from which to develop these is slim (Weekes, forthcoming). Singular progressions in learning are difficult to describe for every curriculum subject. Some types of knowledge by their nature lend themselves to being described in a linear fashion (e.g. algebra, alphabetic knowledge); others (e.g. vocabulary, comprehension) are less constrained and more difficult to capture as a single line of skill development (Paris, 2005). Current emphasis on breaking reading into small fragments to be taught in a linear fashion, while seemingly useful for 'accountability' purposes, has been shown to hinder later results in comprehension in studies in UK (Clark, 2017).

Further, progression is often seen in terms of students' gaps in learning and presented as a 'pedagogic problem', thus oversimplifying the complex social, emotional, and cultural factors implicated in students' educational outcomes.

Nevertheless, the National Literacy Learning Progression is proving useful for teachers because evidence of student learning is used to identify which progression markers students have achieved and to support differentiated teaching.

TOR 2 The extent to which the Masters Review meets key government policy objectives, including:

(a) Addressing concerns about the overcrowding of the curriculum

PETAA Response:

We are not convinced that changes proposed to the NSW curriculum will make a difference to volume of core content. As noted above, much of the perceived overcrowding of curriculum content is a result of the reworking of national curricula for NSW syllabuses (the 'adapting' rather than 'adopting' of national curriculum). Given that this adapting occurred because stakeholders in NSW believed that the Australian Curriculum was inadequate, it is imperative that the review of the NSW curriculum occur in concert with that of the national curriculum.

If briefer curricula are required, then care must be taken that this does not equate to a paring down to basics. The problem with the 'back to basics' approach is two-fold: the notion of the basics is necessarily expanded when we consider literacy in its richest sense, and even so, the 'basics' alone are not sufficient for negotiating the complex literacy demands of the twenty-first century.

(b) Ensuring students' acquisition of excellence in literacy and numeracy, as well as deep knowledge of key subjects

PETAA Response:

The focus on *excellence* in literacy and *deep subject knowledge* is welcome. However, the relationship between these is not always understood by those outside education. Too frequently, literacy is considered as 'done and dusted' by middle primary school. In reality, literacy continues to develop across the years of schooling (and beyond) as students encounter the core concepts, the distinctive ways of reasoning, of working with texts and the values of different subject areas. and their application at different levels of education, in the workplace and in communities.

As discussed above, there is a strong research base supporting the focus on key concepts and deep understanding across the range of subjects, including English. As neither the Australian Curriculum: English nor the NSW English syllabuses explicitly state the key concepts of English, there is a need for this to be rectified in the development of new curriculum. Syllabus documents must be accompanied by documents and appendices that outline the assumptions underpinning the aspects of the subject than is possible within the syllabus itself. The English Textual Concepts model (2017), cited in the MCR, is one model that has been developed by the NSW Department of Education and NSW English Teachers Association to address this void by clearly identifying and naming the key concepts of subject English. This model of English concepts gains authority by linking to the content of the NSW English syllabuses; it is widely used in NSW schools across all sectors. PETAA has provided professional learning to support the concept-based approach to English teaching.

Other problems are evident:

- i. the importance of middle years in ensuring students' schooling success is understated
- ii. the principles used to decide which content is to be retained or jettisoned, alongside the process and responsibility for these decisions, are unclear
- iii. the place of literacy in developing deep knowledge in all learning areas is underplayed in the MCR and the NSW Govt Response.

TOR 3 Other matters of public concern and interest in the development of the NSW curriculum

(a) To what extent, if any, ‘cross-curriculum priorities’ are needed to guide classroom content and teaching

PETAA Response:

It is important to distinguish between ‘*cross-curriculum priorities*’ and ‘*general capabilities*’. The former includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Sustainability, and Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia and address national, regional and global issues.

In contrast, the general capabilities are often referred to as ‘21st Century skills’ and include Literacy, Numeracy, ICT, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Intercultural Understanding, and Ethical Understanding. The MCR focusses on this second group which are internationally considered as essential in contemporary curricula. Few argue with the importance of literacy and numeracy to all curricula. However, the extent to which general capabilities are generic or discipline specific is an ongoing discussion in the research literature (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Parkin & Harper, 2018, 2020; Rose & Martin, 2012) while how teachers implement these in the context of their discipline and their classroom practice continues to be an urgent matter for research (MCR; Scoular et al. 2020).

(c) Whether and to what extent schools should be involved in the ‘social and emotional development’ of students, as per the Melbourne/Alice Springs Declarations, and the growing popularity of ‘wellbeing programs’ in NSW schools

PETAA Response:

Students’ *social and emotional development* is central to how they engage in learning and to how they perceive themselves as individuals (and hence is an important factor in how successful they are as learners). We understand that ‘wellbeing programs’ are often implemented where schools are expected to meet an overwhelming set of community circumstances. Further research is required to determine if schools in disadvantaged communities are more likely to prioritise “wellbeing programs” and, if so, what impact this is likely to have on their capacity to nurture the intellectual development of students.

(e) Given the importance of English literacy across the curriculum, adopting the most effective evidence-based approaches to language acquisition, especially for reading and writing

PETAA Response:

The teaching of literacy needs to be “explicit and systematic, balanced and integrated” (NSW DoE, 2009). Students need to be equipped with a repertoire of literacy capabilities to ensure they operate effectively in all modes of communication: written, spoken, visual, digital and multimodal. The evidence base in teaching early reading and writing is vast. However, this base is not a metaphor for ‘back to basics’; there are complex bodies of research which support the foundations of the Australian Curriculum: English as outlined above. No one aspect of literacy, or any instructional program focusing on one narrow aspect of literacy, should be given priority over others. Nor is there one size that fits all - literacy programs need to be flexible and responsive to address diverse learning needs.

Further, the teaching of literacy is most effective when embedded in the authentic contexts of school subjects, including English (NSW DoE, 2009). Students will respond more positively to literacy teaching when they are engaged, see the learning as relevant and are able to use the literacy knowledge and skills in practical applications.

(g) Effectiveness of NESA in curriculum development and supervision

PETAA Response:

We recognise NESA as the governing body responsible for curriculum development and supervision in NSW. However, NESA chose not to consult with PETAA in the development of the current English K-10 syllabus. As the pre-eminent professional association representing and supporting primary literacy teaching in NSW, PETAA has much expertise and experience to contribute to the development of a new English curriculum.

TOR 4 Any other related matters

PETAA Response

We see a further issue with the proposed timeframe for developing new syllabuses. Curriculum change in the manner of that proposed by the MCR and NSW Govt Response will involve a number of related matters including teacher professional learning, staffing considerations, changes to the organisational structure of schools, and school-community communication networks, as well as re-alignment with the Australian curriculum, NAPLAN (or other assessment programs), and ACARA learning progressions, also currently under review. In addition, providers of initial teacher education and professional learning will need to consider how the NSW syllabus revision relates to the Australian curriculum and the AITSL standards.

The NSW Govt proposed timeline of 4 years (Early years English and Mathematics in 2 years) for full implementation is very short and truncates the MCR expectations of between 6 and 10 years. Curriculum development requires careful consultation during development to ensure 'buy-in'; i.e. that all stakeholders are given opportunity to have input and that such input can be responded to appropriately. Further time is needed to finesse curricula and to adequately support implementation in schools and classrooms, for example, through professional learning and resource development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, we recommend that:

- any proposed changes to NSW curriculum be closely aligned with the aspirations, structure and content of the national curriculum, particularly with respect to outcomes of the current review of the national curriculum F-10 (2021-2020) . Relatedly, the Inquiry clarify the use of the terms 'curriculum' and 'syllabus' as they presently appear to be interchangeable in official and media reports
- there be clear connections between the content of the early and middle years so that students encounter a cumulative body of knowledge with respect to the key concepts of each curriculum subject. Such connections will also assist teachers to understand 'what comes before' and 'where students are headed', as well as assist with differentiating the syllabus for students
- the new NSW syllabuses include a coherent and cohesive view of literacy that is sustained by current literacy research, reflects national curriculum and provides much needed, explicit guidance for teachers
- the theoretical assumptions underpinning the models of literacy, language and literary studies be made explicit through the development of detailed accompanying documents and appendices

- the developmental process for new curriculum includes disciplinary experts, teacher educators and professional associations such as PETAA, and that such involvement be sustained and adequately resourced
- the evidence base for curriculum renewal be carefully scrutinised and made available to the educational field via relevant websites and other means of circulation
- the current National Literacy Learning Progression continues to be treated as 'work in progress' until the research base is such that development with respect to the literacy demands of the curricula areas be reasonably articulated for teachers. Such research should be empirically driven and account for the diversity of NSW schools and communities
- care be taken in reducing content of curricula so that the breadth and depth of curriculum disciplines are retained as well as a clear sense of increasing literacy knowledge and skills demanded of cumulative development of such content
- the timeline for new NSW syllabuses be revisited to ensure that adequate time for researching, development, consultation with stakeholders, community communication and teacher professional learning.

PETAA is grateful for the opportunity to make this submission. Please note that we will be pleased to discuss its contents further with the committee.

Yours sincerely on behalf of PETAA,

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