

# CHAPTER 1



## The school curriculum and its stakeholders: who owns the curriculum?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*By the end of this chapter, you should be able to do the following.*

- LO 1.1** Identify the various meanings attached to the 'school curriculum' and theoretical perspectives underlying them.
- LO 1.2** Evaluate the roles of different 'stakeholders' in the school curriculum.
- LO 1.3** Develop a personal definition for the term 'curriculum' based on your evaluation of different approaches.

**THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM COMES** in many different forms. It may start off as a document prepared by an education system or the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) outlining what students should learn in a particular school subject throughout the years of schooling. Within a school, this document is likely to be translated into programs of study for different classes. Eventually, teachers will plan their teaching based on such a program and this will become the curriculum experienced by students. It is tempting to regard these different curriculum processes as the preserve of educators alone, since it is they who are largely responsible for producing the curriculum at different levels. Yet the production of the curriculum can also be seen as a social, political and economic activity that reflects much broader concerns than narrow educational objectives. In seeking to understand the school curriculum, therefore, we are also seeking to understand the complex forces and patterns that characterise the operation of society. The curriculum does not stand apart from the society in which it is created—it is firmly embedded in it.

Our explorations in this book will focus on the multiple dimensions of the school curriculum. This first chapter attempts to clarify the meaning of the term 'curriculum' and to identify stakeholders who have an interest in its content and function.

## ► The school curriculum: a search for meaning

The first point to note about the term ‘school curriculum’ is that different meanings are attached to it. It is not unusual for curriculum workers to be concerned at the lack of consensus about the field to which they devote so much of their energy. The following are typical comments:

*It is a field that remains contentious in terms of definition and delineation. After perusing all the curriculum texts on our collective shelves, we rediscovered what we and others have known for some time. (Gehrke, Knapp & Sirotnik, 1992, p. 51)*

*A quick survey of a dozen curriculum books would be likely to reveal a dozen different images or characterizations of curriculum. It might even reveal more, because the same author may use the term in different ways. (Schubert, 1986, p. 26)*

### LO 1.1

**Identify the various meanings attached to the ‘school curriculum’ and theoretical perspectives underlying them.**

Table 1.1 sets out some views of the curriculum taken by academic writers. This ambivalence among academics is not reflected in the views of most governments. Governments in many parts of the world have taken an unprecedented interest in what they see as the school curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2001; Komatsu, 2002; Lee, 2001). This interest is predicated on the value that governments so often see in the school curriculum as an instrument of social and economic development, as outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*:

*In the 21st century Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young*

**Table 1.1** Conflicting views of the school curriculum

‘... an interrelated set of plans and experiences that a student undertakes under the guidance of the school.’	<i>Marsh &amp; Willis (1995, p. 10)</i>
‘Some claim that a curriculum is the content or objectives for which schools hold students accountable. Others claim that a curriculum is the set of instructional strategies teachers plan to use.’	<i>Posner (1995, p. 5)</i>
‘A curriculum is an organised set of formal educational and/or training intentions.’	<i>Pratt (1980, p. 4)</i>
‘The curriculum is always, in every society, a reflection of what the people think, feel, believe, and do.’	<i>Smith, Stanley &amp; Shores (1950, p. 3)</i>
‘Curriculum encompasses all learning opportunities provided by the school.’	<i>Saylor &amp; Alexander (1966, p. 5)</i>
‘... (curriculum) is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation ... (it) is intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological and international. Curriculum becomes the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world.’	<i>Pinar et al. (1995, pp. 847–8)</i>

*people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence.*

*Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4)*

The enthusiasm of governments for the school curriculum is matched by that of the business community. Business people see the curriculum as the means by which students gain the requisite knowledge and skills to make them productive workers. In the recent debate on school funding, the Business Council of Australia made its views very clear:

*I hope all governments can now focus on what matters most – working collaboratively to improve the quality of teaching, make content more relevant to the modern world and increase principal autonomy.*

*We can't know what the future economy will look like, but the greatest protection we can offer young people is a high-quality education that fosters a love of learning. (Business Council of Australia, 2017)*

While this support seems quite general, the Business Council has also developed a series of papers that clearly outline business' expectations for graduates whether they are from schools or elsewhere (Business Council of Australia, 2016). Under the general heading, 'Being work ready: A guide to what employers want', the papers outline specific work requirements. Of particular interest in these papers is the emphasis on values as a key outcome of education. This represents an important message for schools and others preparing people for future work.

The business community is in no doubt that the curriculum is important and that it must be structured in a particular way. Importantly, the school curriculum must deliver outcomes that are relevant to employment opportunities and the economic needs of society.

Parents also take a great interest in the curriculum, since it is the means by which their children can have a successful future. Their children routinely leave home every day for school and return in the afternoon. Parents usually take it on trust that children and young people know more and can do more when they return home than when they left in the morning. This trust is based on the school curriculum—the experiences and activities that children have been involved in during the day. Many parents' views of the school curriculum have been shaped by their own experiences as students, as well as by the aspirations they have for their children. Parents wish to see their children grow and develop in personally rewarding ways. Yet parents are also very much attuned to the future: in which direction are their children heading for the years after school? Is the curriculum equipping them adequately? And will they be able to achieve the kinds of things they see as important? These questions are rarely conceived logically, rationally or analytically; rather, they come from the heart and a deep concern for loved ones. Parents are a constant reminder that the curriculum is inextricably linked with values, feelings, affection and love—it is not merely an abstraction for academic inquiry or government manipulation.

Then there are the students: the group for whom the curriculum is designed, the group for whom teachers are prepared, the group for whom both society at large and parents in particular

have such great aspirations. How do students conceive of the school curriculum? This is a difficult question to answer but increasingly opportunities are being provided to gather student views and opinions. ACARA (2016) provides a portal where schools can design their own surveys for administration to parents and/or students at the school level. State education authorities such as those in Queensland and Victoria also provide opportunities for school-level surveys on a voluntary basis. Academics have also focused on collecting student views of schooling, and these are publicly available (Groves & Welsh, 2010). Even international studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) collect views from students in order to contextualise results. Thus while newspaper headlines continue to denigrate Australian students' academic performance on such tests, the 2015 PISA results also indicated that 54% of Australian students wanted to go to university and 74% said they wanted to be the best in their class (Singhal, 2017). Student voice is important and in this PISA feedback it seems as though Australian students are full of confidence in themselves and about the future. This is important feedback—probably more important than their maths scores that were still above the OECD average in 2015. Student voices should not be ignored when it comes to the curriculum because they clearly have personal views and insights that can be valuable for developing curriculum experiences.

It should not be a surprise if young people do not always feel the same way about the curriculum as many adults do, whether those adults are academics, business people, politicians or parents. For a possible explanation of this, go back to Table 1.1 and check the curriculum definition provided by Pinar and his colleagues. Young people have a view of themselves and their world; they have aspirations and dreams, and it may be that the way we currently put together the curriculum is not always able to meet these concerns.

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? Is the search for meaning in the curriculum simply a conundrum in which there are conflicting and competing positions incapable of being resolved? This may be a convenient academic description, but it is not good enough for our young people or for society. Educators must make a greater effort to reconcile apparently conflicting views, for more is at stake than simply the resolution of an academic issue. In seeking to understand better the role of the curriculum in the 21st century, the purpose should be to ensure that children and young people are well equipped to handle whatever it is that this century will call them to do and to be. The curriculum of schools is essentially about the future; it cannot be based on curriculum models that have been handed down from previous centuries. It seems important to ensure that the curriculum of schools is able to help students to construct a future that is both personally and socially rewarding.

This involves rethinking the purpose and function of the curriculum away from the notion of conflicting and competing interests—those of parents, students, governments and the business community—towards the idea that there may be a core of common interests that binds people together. This is not to minimise the importance of difference. People are different in many ways. Democratic societies celebrate those differences. Yet for a society to function, there must be common interests and common bonds that bring the people together. This is a key idea for understanding the curriculum. The interests of different **stakeholder** groups in the school curriculum are explored further in the following section, as is the idea of common interests across different groups.

## Check your understanding



1. What does the curriculum mean to different people and why is it important?
2. Based on the different meanings of 'curriculum', what are your own thoughts about the curriculum? Jot down some notes and we shall return to this question towards the end of the chapter.

## ► Stakeholders in the curriculum

### LO 1.2

**Evaluate the roles of different 'stakeholders' in the school curriculum.**

A public company has its shareholders—the people who own a financial share in a company. In a similar way, the school curriculum has its stakeholders—people with an interest in the content and requirements of the curriculum.

There are, first, the interests of individuals: students, parents and teachers. These individual interests may or may not be mutually exclusive.

Students usually attend school under compulsion until at least age 15, but until 17 in some states. Even though attendance is compulsory, students still have personal, social and vocational aspirations. What is more, students are part of changing and evolving cultures that are often at odds with those of the adults with whom they have to interact. The school curriculum must be able to meet students' aspirations and take into account the changing cultural standards from the perspectives of the students themselves. Otherwise, students are likely to become disengaged and disruptive and may see little value in what school has to offer. The teacher's role is to make sure this does not happen.

Parents also have aspirations that need to be recognised. These may be vocational in nature, but they may also be personal and social. Above all, parents want to see their children do well and they vest their faith in the school and its curriculum to ensure that this happens.

Teachers come at this from a different angle—they are the professionals, just as you will be. Teacher education equips teachers with knowledge and skills that in all likelihood dispose them towards the academic rather than the vocational, the theoretical rather than the practical and the esoteric rather than the relevant. In one sense, teachers simply implement the curriculum guidelines that govern the school. Yet more importantly, they interpret those guidelines and add a pedagogical dimension that creates day-to-day curriculum experiences for students. Teachers, in reality, are the mediators of the curriculum. Professor Stephen Thornton (1989), an Australian academic working in the United States, referred to teachers as 'curriculum gatekeepers' (p. 1) by which he meant that they have the final say about the shape the curriculum takes in classrooms.

So far it might seem that when we mention the 'curriculum' we are thinking of a single, uniform document or even experience. Go back and check the definitions in Table 1.1 and see the extent to which this appears to be correct. Yet it is now well recognised that individuals and groups also have special interests that the school curriculum must address. In Australia, for example, it is now recognised that the curriculum must in particular address the special needs of girls, Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities, people from a

non-English-speaking background, young people who live in poverty, and the geographically isolated. Each of these groups has special interests that cannot be met by assuming that everyone is the same. The curriculum must cater for difference and show how such difference is not a barrier to learning but is valued as a part of Australia's diversity.

It is not enough to recognise that there are individual and group interests and concerns within the school. To these must be added the interests of groups that are external to the school. Governments have interests that are largely, although not exclusively, economic in nature. Charting economic growth and development has become a major preoccupation with governments—hence their concern. The nature of the school curriculum will determine the knowledge and skills that future citizens will possess and therefore their capacity to contribute to the nation's economy in a productive way. Of course, governments are interested in more than economics. In general, democratic governments also wish to see a community that is socially cohesive, politically literate, culturally sophisticated, tolerant and just. The school curriculum can do much to contribute to these social objectives and in the current international political climate such objectives must be regarded as fundamentally important.

The business community shares much of the government's economic interests. For businesses to be productive and prosperous, they need workers who are literate, numerate and skilled in a variety of other ways. While businesses are capable of providing a good deal of training themselves, they also have to rely on schools supplying young people with the range of talent and skills they require. Yet, as shown above, modern businesses are also concerned with values that workers bring to the workplace so it is not just a matter of technical skills. Dispositions such as teamwork, tolerance, respect and a positive work ethic are also regarded as important.

Universities and other agencies of further education and training have an interest in the shape and form of the school curriculum. In Australia, universities have exerted an enormous influence on the curriculum, especially in the later years of schooling. In an age of mass secondary education, however, the role of universities in this regard is being increasingly questioned. Nevertheless, as the next step in the education process for a rising number (although by no means the majority) of young people, universities will retain their interest in the education of young people. They will always want to play a 'watchdog' role to ensure that potential students come equipped with the requisite knowledge to undertake further studies. Universities' values are reflected in their admission requirements and standards, as well as in the requirements at the next level, in professional areas such as medicine, law, engineering, and information technology studies. These all have a 'backwash' effect on what needs to be included in the school curriculum.

There are also other community groups that have a stake in what happens to young people at school. Social service agencies, in particular, have to deal with the social, medical and welfare issues related to young people and their families. Social workers and school psychologists are often part of day-to-day school operations. These social issues cannot be divorced from what happens to students in schools. Sometimes, when school authorities are trying to diagnose an educational problem, it seems they neglect to look beyond the school to the student's life outside. Schools often try to solve problems for which they do not have the skills or expertise, particularly in the areas of mental health and family relationships. Students have lives outside the classroom and the external environment is a powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour. Student misbehaviour can often be traced to family or peer-group issues rather than to an educational



cause. Teachers and school authorities are not always the best people to provide advice and assistance in this broader context.

## Check your understanding



1. Which stakeholders do you think have the most legitimate claim to influence the school curriculum: businesses, governments, parents, teachers, or external agencies? In your opinion, why do these different claims often conflict?

## ► Orientations to the curriculum

### LO 1.3

**Develop a personal definition for the term 'curriculum' based on your evaluation of different approaches.**

The challenge for developing a genuine understanding of the curriculum is to make sense of the different ways academics talk about it and the expectations stakeholders have. Academics are actually not very good at communicating with stakeholders, but teachers need to be! Academic conceptions of the curriculum are described in different ways. For example, **social reconstructionism** describes the curriculum as an instrument of change in society. **Academic rationalism** describes a curriculum based on academic subjects only. Those academics who hold **instrumental values** believe that the curriculum should focus only on technical or practical outcomes. **Critical theory** argues that the curriculum should address social inequities and restore social justice. In an important sense, academic conceptions of the curriculum

both help and hinder us at this point. They help in the sense that they provide labels for the different conceptions that are articulated in the broader society, but they hinder because these labels tend to compartmentalise. Thus, when different orientations to the curriculum are labelled as 'academic', 'instrumental', 'social reconstructionist' or 'critical', barriers are constructed that suggest these orientations are self-contained. Rather than creating barriers, it would be better to create new categories of thinking about the curriculum—categories that include the needs of all the individuals and groups that have been referred to so far. This model for the curriculum is shown in Table 1.2.

The main point to note about this proposed model is that the orientations and functions of the curriculum are not seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary. In constructing the school curriculum all interests need to be taken into consideration, with the aim of meeting the needs of all individuals and groups. For example, the curriculum needs to serve both economic and social purposes—these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although different groups may want to focus on one rather than on the other. Individual needs must also be met even as young people are being prepared for later life. Young people live in the moment so their immediate contexts, pressures and interests can't be neglected altogether. This can be called an inclusive model of the curriculum because it attempts to cater for the needs of all stakeholders while at the same time meeting the needs of society as a whole. Whether it does so adequately and whether there is a better way to do it is a matter of judgment.

**Table 1.2** Orientations and functions of the school curriculum

Curriculum orientations	Curriculum functions
	<i>Knowledge, skills and values that:</i>
<b>Cultural</b>	ensure the foundations of society are transmitted to the next generation
<b>Personal</b>	provide for the intrinsic needs of individuals and groups
<b>Vocational</b>	ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to participate actively in the world of work
<b>Social</b>	enable society to function in a harmonious way for the benefit of all
<b>Economic</b>	ensure that the productive capacity of individuals and the nation as a whole is taken into consideration.

## Check your understanding



1. Review the definitions of 'curriculum' provided in Table 1.1 and the orientations to curriculum in Table 1.2. With which do you agree? With which do you disagree?
2. Formulate your own view of the school curriculum based on your reading of this chapter and additional reading selected from the references. Share your views with one or two class mates and see what similarities and differences there are. Keep this formulation and come back to it from time to time as you read the remaining chapters.

## A CASE



**THIS CASE IS BASED ON A RESPONSE** to *Review of the Australian Curriculum* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014)

*What the Review noticed was that as teachers implemented the content of the Australian Curriculum Phase One, they selected the content on which they wanted to focus. This is a reflection of the fact that teachers select content to meet the needs of specific groups of students. Time alone does not allow every piece of content to be taught to every student across the country. This is not how the curriculum is meant to work. The Australian Curriculum is not the Bible, each word of which must be learned and memorised. The Australian Curriculum is a description of the content that should be mastered by a particular age cohort. If some of that content is taught and mastered, good and well. If some of that particular content is not taught (for a range of reasons including shortage of time, overcrowding, etc.), then it can reasonably be assumed that the student possesses the requisite skills to transfer and apply what they learned from one content area to another.*



*The Australian Curriculum is not about filling empty vessels; it is still in the teacher's domain to light the fires of passion for and mastery of knowledge. (Kindler, 2015)*

## PROBES

1. What is the main argument here about the role of teachers and the selection of curriculum content? Do you think all stakeholders would agree with this view?
2. Under what circumstances do you think there might be different curriculum for different students in different parts of the country?

## SUMMARY

- ▶ If the curriculum is seen as the means by which young people and adults gain the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be productive and informed citizens in a democratic society, then everyone in the community has a stake in the shape and form that the curriculum takes.
- ▶ Politicians and employers look for a skilled and competent workforce. Parents look for the means by which their children can live a rewarding and satisfying life. Advocates of issues and causes want to ensure that students are aware of and sensitive to the major issues that will confront them when they grow up. Society as a whole may wish students to have a grasp of certain basic skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy) and certain kinds of knowledge (e.g. an understanding of the history of their country).
- ▶ No one is neutral when it comes to the curriculum. The eventual form that the school curriculum takes in the shape of guidelines or frameworks therefore represents a compromise between groups and individuals in society seeking to influence the education of young people.
- ▶ It might be said that the curriculum is constructed by groups and individuals to suit the particular interests they represent. In this sense, the curriculum itself is not neutral—it represents a point of view or a perspective. It is often contested and often the subject of public debate and discussion.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**academic rationalism** The belief that the curriculum should be based on academic subjects only.

**critical theory** The theory that curriculum should address social inequities and restore social justice.

**instrumental values** A value system that supports the idea that curriculum should focus on technical or practical outcomes.

**social reconstructivism** The belief that curriculum should be an instrument of change in society.

**stakeholder** A person with an interest or concern in something; in this case, people with an interest in the content and requirements of a school curriculum.

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