

# THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

## CHAPTER 01

Although this book is primarily about teaching strategies, it begins with a chapter on the Australian Curriculum for several reasons. The main reason is to help teacher education students gain a basic understanding of the broad curriculum framework Australian teachers are asked to work within. Without such an understanding it is difficult to see the relevance of ideas about effective teaching that are explored in chapters 2 and 3, and it is impossible to make the logical choices that will lead to using the strategies described in chapters 6 to 14. The curriculum also provides the starting point for the planning described in chapter 4 and for the reflective teaching practices described in chapter 5.

This chapter is primarily a description of the Australian Curriculum and its broad implications for teachers. It is not intended to be a comprehensive treatise on curriculum theory and practice.

The school curricula in each Australian State and Territory have previously been quite diverse. Despite the arguments in favour of uniformity, various attempts to bring some consistency to the State and Territory curricula in key learning areas such as English and Mathematics have, historically, met with very limited success. There are many reasons for this situation – some political and some educational. However, over the past 25 years there has been some progress, in part due to a gradual agreement on and adoption of a set of foundational principles on which to base a national curriculum. The Australian Curriculum is the latest attempt to make those principles explicit and to embed them in comprehensive curriculum documentation.

This chapter describes the basic structure and key features of the Australian Curriculum. It also explains why some of these features are included and what implications they have for teachers. In particular it begins an exploration of how teachers can use the curriculum guidelines to assist them in making decisions about how to teach – a journey that continues throughout this book. This is important because although the Australian Curriculum specifies what content should be taught, it gives very little explicit guidance about what teaching strategies could or should be used. Such guidelines remain the prerogative of the various States, Territories and school sectors.

This chapter also explains the principles of outcomes-based education (OBE) and argues that they underpin the Australian Curriculum even though this is not acknowledged in the curriculum documentation. By understanding these principles, teachers are in a better position to implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that are consistent with its stated aims and rationale.

*When you have mastered the ideas in this chapter, you will be able to:*

- explain the key features of the Australian Curriculum
- explain how the principles of outcomes-based education are evident in the Australian Curriculum

→ use the guidelines provided on the Australian Curriculum website as a basis for planning and implementing instruction.

## BASIC APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM DESIGN

When a new school curriculum is being prepared, important decisions have to be made about the principles on which it will be based. These decisions eventually influence what is taught in schools, how it is taught, how the school system is organised, how learners are assessed, how information about learners' achievements is reported, and many other aspects of schooling. Therefore, it is important for teachers implementing the curriculum to understand what curriculum design principles have been used and why those principles were chosen.

Essentially there are three broad approaches to structuring a **curriculum framework**: a content-based approach, an experience-based approach and an outcomes-based approach. In a **content-based** approach, curriculum design starts with identifying the content that students have to learn about. For example, a content-based approach to a school History curriculum would start with broad decisions such as whether the course would focus on world history or Australian history. If it were decided that the curriculum would focus on the history of Australia, then more specific decisions would have to be made about content; for example, what period of time would be covered, what events would be emphasised, and so on. These decisions would establish the foundations for the content-based curriculum and eventually lead to specific details to guide teachers in their decisions about what content to address in their day-to-day teaching. This approach to curriculum design inevitably leads to debates about what content should be included and what content should be excluded from the curriculum. It also leads to debates about the perspective from which the content should be interpreted and presented; for example, whether the school History curriculum should emphasise Indigenous or other perspectives on Australian history. The inevitability of disagreements about the values implicit in a content-based curriculum is illustrated by recent moves to revise the Australian History curriculum (Davies, 2014).

A content-based approach to curriculum design tends to emphasise the importance of individual subjects, rather than the importance of the type of learning that integrates knowledge and skills across all subjects. It may encourage teachers to make decisions such as: 'In this lesson I am going to tell learners about the explorations of Matthew Flinders' without necessarily considering how this content will help learners to achieve the long-term goals of the curriculum.

Some curriculum designers take a different approach – they develop an **experience-based** curriculum. In this approach, curriculum design starts with identifying the learning experiences students will participate in. For example, an experience-based Science curriculum might be designed around a series of investigations that learners are to conduct. Curricula that are designed in this way can give learners very valuable learning experiences, but there will always be debates about which learning experiences are most useful and why. It can lead to teachers making decisions such as: 'In this lesson I am going to have learners investigate the effect of pressure on the boiling point of water' without necessarily thinking about how this experience will help learners achieve the long-term goals of the curriculum.

A third approach to curriculum design results in an **outcomes-based** curriculum. In this case, curriculum design starts with the question: 'What do we want students to be able to do by the end of their learning?' If we think of the 'end' as being the point at which learners leave school, then an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design forces us to think about the long-term goals of the curriculum. These long-term goals guide all the decisions that curriculum designers make about the outcomes that learners are expected to achieve in each part of the curriculum; for example, in each subject and in each year. This approach to curriculum design leads to teachers making decisions such as: 'By the end of this lesson I want learners to be able to assess the reliability of information on websites (a lesson outcome) because this is part of being able to identify ethical issues related to the use of computer software (a learning outcome from the Computing applications course) and this will help learners to use technology effectively (one of the overall purposes of schooling)'. In other words, the teacher is thinking about short-, medium- and long-term learning goals when planning lessons.

As you progress through this chapter you will see that the differences between outcomes-based and content-based curricula can be quite significant. Outcomes-based curriculum design (sometimes referred to as **outcomes-based education**, or simply OBE) certainly does not deny the importance of content – learning has to engage students with some form of content. However, in an outcomes-based curriculum the content is chosen *after* the outcomes have been determined, not before. Most importantly, all content is chosen for a particular learning purpose, not just because someone liked the content or thought it had some inherent value.

Likewise, an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design does not deny the importance of learning experiences – learners have to do appropriate things in order to learn. However, particular learning experiences (such as a science investigation) are considered valuable only if they contribute directly to learners' achievement of learning outcomes that have been specified prior to the selection of learning experiences.

In reality it is rare to see 'pure' forms of any of the above three approaches to curriculum design. What generally occurs is that the curriculum has elements or features of each approach – and as you will see later in this chapter, this is what has happened with the Australian Curriculum and the way it has been implemented in various States and Territories.

## ORIGINS AND FEATURES OF THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

The concept of having a common school curriculum across all States and Territories has been debated for many decades. Attempts to gain agreement among the eight different curriculum jurisdictions have, until recently, met with little success. One reason for this is that each of the Australian school systems has a very different history, which led to a view that its current curriculum was a satisfactory response to the educational context in each State and Territory. However, the transition to a substantially common curriculum across Australia has begun.

In 1989 the then Australian Education Council (later subsumed into the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], which was subsequently replaced by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood) adopted 10 Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia (AEC, 1989) and released them as part of the Hobart Declaration on Schooling. This led to the AEC endorsing the development of a National Curriculum Statement and a National Profile in each of the eight Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in 1991. In 1999, MCEETYA endorsed a revised set of national goals for schooling and released them as The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (MCEETYA, 1999). Each State and Territory used the principles in the Hobart Declaration and the Adelaide Declaration in different ways and independently developed a different curriculum framework (all broadly consistent with the principles stated in the declarations).

In December 2008, the Council of State and Territory Education Ministers adopted the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. This declaration provided the guiding principles for the development of a national school curriculum (Foundation to Year 10) that is called the **Australian Curriculum**. The key features of the Australian Curriculum are described on the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website (<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>) and can be summarised as follows:

- The Australian Curriculum has nine **learning areas** (English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, The Arts, Technologies, Health and Physical Education, Languages, and Work Studies. Some learning areas are subdivided into subjects.
- The Australian Curriculum describes a learning entitlement for each Australian student that should provide a foundation for successful, lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community.
- It emphasises the need for young Australians to be able to engage effectively with and prosper in a globalised world and make an important contribution to building the social, intellectual and creative capital of our nation.
- It emphasises the importance of knowledge, understanding and skills in all learning areas and sets out what all young people should be taught through the specification of curriculum content.
- It requires seven **general capabilities** to be integrated into all learning areas. These capabilities encompass skills, behaviours and dispositions that students develop and apply to content knowledge and that support them in becoming successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.
- It emphasises three **cross-curricular priorities** that are to be embedded in all learning areas.
- It establishes expectations for student achievement at points in their schooling through the specification of **achievement standards**.
- It acknowledges that the needs and interests of students will vary, and that schools and teachers should plan from the curriculum in ways that respond to those needs and interests.

- It acknowledges that the ways in which young people learn will continue to change and that their future learning will be shaped by many challenges (some of which are not yet known).

In December 2010, ACARA released the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History. Digital versions of the senior English, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography curricula were released in December 2012. Curricula for other subjects were released progressively during 2013 and 2014, but not all development and endorsement was complete at the end of 2014.

Once the curriculum for a subject has been endorsed by the State and Territory Ministers for Education, responsibility for its implementation passes to the relevant State or Territory authority. For example, in NSW the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) is responsible for advising the NSW Minister for Education on all curriculum matters. Through this process, the States and Territories maintain control over the detail of much of the curriculum, with the result that the Australian Curriculum is not implemented uniformly across the country. Each State and Territory has taken a view similar to Victoria, namely, that a curriculum 'that incorporates the Australian Curriculum and ensures the maintenance and strengthening of particular Victorian priorities and approaches to teaching and learning' (VCAA, 2014:11) is preferable to a straight adoption of the Australian Curriculum. In some States, such as NSW, there are legislative requirements that actually prevent some aspects of the Australian Curriculum being implemented. It is important, therefore, for you to become familiar with how the Australian Curriculum has been adapted in the State or Territory (and in the school sector) in which you teach.

When considering the information provided on the Australian Curriculum website, it soon becomes obvious that the principles on which the Australian Curriculum is based are not a radical departure from the principles that underpin most of the previous State and Territory curricula. Some of the terminology has changed, and some of the purposes of schooling have been made more explicit, but the Australian Curriculum has its roots in well-established educational theories and practices. For example, the idea that school learning should provide a foundation for successful lifelong learning and prepare students for their life after school is a restatement of one of the foundational principles of outcomes-based education (Spady, 1994) that has had varying levels of influence on most State and Territory curricula over the past 25 years. Likewise, the ideas that teachers should adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of students, and that the ways students learn now and into the future are different from the ways students learned in the past, are not new.

In order to teach in ways that are consistent with the values embedded in the Australian Curriculum, teachers need to look beyond the obvious features (such as the specified content) and consider the underlying principles on which it is based. They will then be in a position to make planning and teaching decisions that reflect these values. Some of the specific details of the Australian Curriculum and its implications for teachers are explored in the following sections.

# MAKING SENSE OF THE DOCUMENTATION

## Key sections

Within each learning area (English, Mathematics and so on) the Australian Curriculum includes the following information:

- A *rationale*: this explains the place and purpose of the learning area in the school curriculum and indicates how learning of that area contributes to meeting the educational goals of the Melbourne Declaration. In each curriculum document the rationale starts with a key sentence that is the essence of the rationale; for example, 'The study of English is central to the learning and development of all young Australians' and 'History is a disciplined process of inquiry into the past that develops students' curiosity and imagination'. In essence, the rationale answers the question: 'Why are students studying this subject?'
- The *aims*: these identify the major learning that students will demonstrate as a result of studying that learning area. Only a small number of aims are stated in each curriculum (3 to 7) and they are very broad statements; for example, 'The Australian Curriculum: Mathematics aims to ensure that students are confident, creative users and communicators of mathematics, able to investigate, represent and interpret situations in their personal and work lives and as active citizens'.
- The *content structure*: this outlines how the curriculum is organised across the years of schooling and the focus of the curriculum at each stage of learning. Each curriculum is divided into strands. For example, the English curriculum is organised around three interrelated strands: Language, Literature and Literacy. Content descriptions in each strand are divided into substrands, such as 'Language for interaction', 'Creating literature' and 'Creating texts'.
- *Advice on the nature of learners and the relevant curriculum across year groupings*: the four groupings used are Foundation–Year 2, Years 3–6, Years 7–10, and Senior secondary years. For each grouping there are general statements about curriculum focus and the expectations that teachers should have of learners. For example, in Years 3–6 students are expected to think more logically and consistently than in earlier years and be able to give reasons for their actions.
- The *achievement standards*: these describe the quality of learning students should typically demonstrate at each point of their schooling as an indication that they are ready to progress to the next level of learning. Annotated work samples are provided to help teachers interpret these standards and assess the quality of students' learning in terms of the extent of their knowledge, the depth of their understanding and the sophistication of their skills. The specification of achievement standards is a continuation of the standards-referenced assessment approach that was embedded in some previous State and Territory curricula.
- A *glossary*: this defines key terms used in the curriculum to promote consistent interpretation of those terms.
- Information about how the *general capabilities* and *cross-curriculum priorities* contribute to and are developed across the curriculum – as described in the following subsections.

**A GUIDED TOUR****ACTIVITY**

Visit the Australian Curriculum website at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>. Read the 'Online User Guide' and view the video on 'The new Australian Curriculum website'.

Use these two guides to help you explore each of the curriculum features summarised above for a subject you will teach.

## General capabilities

The Australian Curriculum includes seven general capabilities that students are expected to develop and use in their learning across the curriculum. They are:

- 1 literacy
- 2 numeracy
- 3 information and communication technology (ICT) capability
- 4 critical and creative thinking
- 5 ethical understanding
- 6 personal and social capability
- 7 intercultural understanding.

These general capabilities are designed to support students in becoming 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens' (ACARA, 2013:2). Each general capability has a description, a rationale and a statement to indicate how the general capabilities contribute to and are developed across the curriculum. There are also specific indications of the sections of the curriculum in which each capability should be developed. Teachers are expected to teach and assess general capabilities as they are incorporated within each learning area curriculum. State and Territory curriculum and school authorities will determine the extent to which student learning of the general capabilities will be assessed and reported.

It is useful to consider the historical context that led to the development of this list of general capabilities because it helps teachers understand why these capabilities are emphasised in the Australian Curriculum. In the late 1980s and early 1990s in Australia there were strong demands by employers for school education to better prepare young people for the workforce. In response to these demands, a series of national committees was formed. One, the Finn Committee, commissioned by the Australian Education Council, proposed new national targets for participation and levels of attainment in post-compulsory education and training, recommended reform of entry-level training arrangements, and identified six key areas of competence essential for all young people in preparation for employment.

A subsequent initiative of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments built on the work of the Finn Committee and resulted in a report being presented to the Australian Education Council and the Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training. This report, known as the Mayer Report, contained a set of seven statements that described what were considered to be essential skills for young people as



they finished school and entered the workforce or undertook further education. These statements, which became known as the key competencies, were:

- 1 collecting, analysing and organising information
- 2 communicating ideas and information
- 3 planning and organising activities
- 4 working with others in teams
- 5 using mathematical ideas and techniques
- 6 solving problems
- 7 using technology.

An eighth competency, using understanding of cultures, was proposed but was not nationally endorsed.

The 1999 Adelaide Declaration incorporated all the Mayer Key Competencies and specified additional desirable achievements in personal, interpersonal, ethical, civic and employment-related dimensions of learning. From that time, State and Territory school curricula began to incorporate the key competencies but in quite diverse ways. One common approach was that curriculum documents suggested that the key competencies should be integrated into the teaching of normal subjects rather than being taught in isolation as discrete generic skills.

Curricula driven by the key competencies were intended to enhance educational outcomes for all young people, promote the skills necessary to enhance Australia's overall educational and economic competitiveness, and support the convergence of general and vocational education (Mayer, 1993). Because the key competencies were developed through a collaborative process involving the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, and teachers, parents, business, industry, and union representatives, they were widely accepted. They promised to provide the type of 'future focus' for schooling that Spady (1994) saw as crucial for outcomes-based education.

In 2002 the Department of Education, Science and Training commissioned a project to review the requirements for generic employability competencies 'in recognition of the changing nature of work and skills' (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002:2). This resulted in the development of an employability skills framework that identified 13 'personal attributes that contribute to overall employability' and eight 'skills' (communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and use of information technology). These employability skills quickly became requirements in vocational education curricula but their direct influence on school curricula was much less obvious.

The seven general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum are a logical development of the key competencies and employability skills. Although the general capabilities do not place such an overt emphasis on preparing students for employment, they certainly do emphasise that schooling should prepare students for their life after school so that they can 'live and work successfully in the twenty-first century' (ACARA, 2013:2). In doing so, the general capabilities take the curriculum beyond a collection of statements about what should be taught and emphasise some of the foundational purposes of schooling. This approach is entirely consistent with Spady's approach to outcomes-based education and addresses some of the issues of student engagement raised by Yazzie-Mintz (2010).



**ACTIVITY**

Review the Australian Curriculum for a subject you will teach and note how the general capabilities are addressed explicitly in the content of that subject. Then interview a teacher who is teaching that subject and ask them what strategies they use for integrating the general capabilities into their teaching. How will this influence the way you teach?

**GENERAL CAPABILITIES**

## Cross-curriculum priorities

To help make the Australian Curriculum relevant to the lives of students and to ensure that it addresses the contemporary issues students face, the curriculum has three specific cross-curriculum priorities:

- 1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- 2 Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
- 3 Sustainability.

It could be claimed that every curriculum is a political tool that emphasises or favours some perspectives over others, and there is likely to be some debate over the choice of the cross-curriculum priorities. However, for now, the challenge is for teachers to understand the rationale behind these priorities and to embed them in their teaching as required.

The rationales for each of the cross-curriculum priorities are given on the Australian Curriculum website (ACARA, 2014a) and these statements emphasise the following:

- An understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' unique sense of identity can be obtained through a study of their histories and cultures. This understanding will help all learners to participate positively in the ongoing development of Australia.
- An understanding of Australia's Asian neighbours is important because of Australia's social, cultural, political and economic links with Asia.
- The future of our society depends on students developing knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to contribute to sustainable patterns of living that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

The cross-curriculum priorities are embedded in all learning areas – they are not treated as separate areas of learning. This presents a challenge for teachers; however, each curriculum document contains a statement to indicate how the cross-curriculum priorities contribute to and are developed across that curriculum. The curriculum for each subject indicates specific sections in which each priority should be emphasised.

**ACTIVITY**

Review the Australian Curriculum for a subject you will teach and note how the cross-curriculum priorities are addressed explicitly in the content of that subject. Then interview a teacher who is teaching that subject and ask them what strategies they use for integrating the cross-curriculum priorities into their teaching. How will you be able to use similar strategies?

**CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

To understand a curriculum and use it to guide your teaching, you need to consider it from three perspectives: its philosophical basis, the systemic structures that have been set up for its implementation, and the instructional practices that are required for this implementation. The first of these perspectives is explored briefly in this section. The systemic structures (school organisation, etc.) are not dealt with in this book but examples of these structures can be found in the Weblinks section at the end of the chapter. The instructional practices by which teachers implement the curriculum are dealt with in chapters 4 to 14.

The Australian Curriculum places a very heavy emphasis on content, so teachers should be left in little doubt about what they are required to teach. The reasons why these things have to be taught and the specifics of how they should be taught are not so obvious. Some light can be thrown on these questions if we consider the educational philosophies that are embedded in the curriculum – that is, the set of beliefs and assumptions about learning, teaching and assessment that appear to drive the curriculum. It appears that these philosophies are very similar to the foundational principles of outcomes-based education (OBE) even though there is no explicit reference to OBE in the Australian Curriculum. This idea is explored because it will help teachers to understand the (limited) extent to which the philosophical basis of the Australian Curriculum differs from that of the curriculum frameworks within which they currently work (or within which they studied as students at school).

The most detailed descriptions of the theoretical basis of OBE are provided by Spady (1994, 1998). He defined it this way:

Outcome-Based Education means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organizing the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens.

(Spady, 1994:1)

As Spady and Schlebusch (1999:39) put it, ‘curriculum developers who have a clear focus on the future believe that what students learn today should directly equip them to deal with the many challenges and opportunities they are likely to face in tomorrow’s complex world’. These ideas are embedded in the Australian Curriculum. They were put this way in an early version of the overview of the curriculum:

The Australian Curriculum describes a learning entitlement for each Australian student that provides a foundation for successful, lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community ... [It] acknowledges the changing ways in which young people will learn and the challenges that will continue to shape their learning in the future ... In a world where knowledge itself is constantly growing and evolving, students need to develop a set of skills, behaviours and dispositions ... [that] equip them to be lifelong

learners able to operate with confidence in a complex, information-rich, globalised world.

(ACARA, 2011)

Quite clearly, Spady and the Australian Curriculum developers were expressing the same basic view about the need for schooling to prepare students for their life after school. Where they differ lies in the starting point for curriculum development and in the process used to move from there to the final curriculum. The Australian Curriculum developers took the view that the desired result could be achieved by starting with a detailed specification of 'learning area content and achievement standards that describe what students will learn and what teachers will teach' (ACARA, 2014b). Spady took the view that the desired result should be achieved by starting with a detailed specification of learning outcomes that he defined as 'high quality, culminating demonstrations of significant learning in context' (Spady, 1994:1). The end goals are similar but the starting points are different.

The difference in the two approaches is subtle but significant. Specific content in the Australian Curriculum is there because someone decided it was important. Specific content in an outcomes-based curriculum is there because it was selected as a vehicle to help students achieve a particular learning outcome (that someone had decided was important).

There will always be arguments about curriculum content. What should or should not be included? What philosophical or political views should influence content selection? To what extent should content be prescribed or recommended? What scope is there for including or excluding the content preferences of individual schools or teachers? In an outcomes-based curriculum, many of these choices are left up to individual teachers. In a content-based curriculum, such as the Australian Curriculum, the curriculum developers have made these choices.

The explicit focus on content rather than learning outcomes could be seen as a weakness of the Australian Curriculum. However, many of the usual concerns about content-based curricula become irrelevant when we consider the way in which the content and the achievement standards are specified in the Australian Curriculum. Much of the curriculum content (particularly for English and Mathematics) is actually described in terms that resemble outcome statements. For example, in the Australian Curriculum: Mathematics one of the Year 2 content statements is 'Count and order small collections of Australian coins and notes according to their value'. The curriculum elaboration of this statement includes 'counting collections of coins or notes to make up a particular value, such as that shown on a price tag'. It is easy to see the similarity between statements such as these and an outcome statement such as 'Students will be able to accurately count collections of coins or notes to make up a particular value'. In Science and History, many of the content statements are less like outcome statements. For example, one of the Year 2 Science content statements is 'A push or pull affects how an object moves or changes shape'. In this case, teachers are left to decide what it is that students are expected to be able to do as a result of learning this content.

Even when the content statements give little indication of the purpose of having students explore the content, the achievement standards specify what learners should be

able to do by the end of each year, thus effectively specifying learning outcomes. Teachers can use the achievement standards as a guide when interpreting the content descriptions in the curriculum, just as they would when implementing an outcomes-based curriculum. For example, one of the Year 2 Science achievement standards is 'Students use their experiences to pose questions and predict outcomes of investigations'. So, a teacher dealing with the 'push or pull' content mentioned above would use this as an opportunity to help students develop their questioning and predicting skills. Thus the approach taken in the Australian Curriculum has the potential to achieve essentially the same result as that which would have been achieved by an explicitly outcomes-based curriculum.

In addition to the idea that curricula should be developed from outcomes that describe long-term significant learning, Spady suggested that the curriculum design process should be guided by three basic premises:

- 1 All students can learn and succeed, but not all in the same time or in the same way.
- 2 Successful learning promotes even more successful learning.
- 3 Schools (and teachers) control many of the conditions that determine whether or not students are successful at school learning.

The first of these premises is evident in the Australian Curriculum. For example, in its statement on the implications for teaching, assessment and reporting, the English curriculum acknowledges that:

Students learn at different rates and in different stages. Depending on each student's rate of learning, not all of the content descriptions for a particular year level may be relevant to a student in that year level. Some students may have already learned a concept or skill, in which case it will not have to be explicitly taught to them in the year level stipulated. Other students may need to be taught concepts or skills stipulated for earlier year levels.

(ACARA, 2014c)

This statement is also an acknowledgement of the hierarchical nature of learning (implicit in Spady's second premise) and of the important influence that students' prior knowledge has on their further learning.

The essential idea behind Spady's third premise is that teachers (and the school and education systems within which they work) are ultimately responsible for determining whether or not students learn. Spady did not deny the important influence of factors such as learners' inherent abilities or their motivation to learn – but he was very critical of the approach to schooling that assumed that what a learner knew on some particular day or how the learner behaved on a particular occasion should unquestionably be taken as an indication of what that learner was capable of learning. He placed the ultimate responsibility for students' learning squarely on the shoulders of teachers.

Although not stated as forcefully as Spady's third premise, the responsibility that teachers have for student learning is clear in the Australian Curriculum. For example, the English curriculum acknowledges that teachers need to 'develop a variety of learning experiences that are relevant, rigorous and meaningful and allow for different rates of development, in particular for younger students and for those who require additional support' and 'it is expected that appropriate adjustments will be made for some students

to enable them to access and participate in meaningful learning, and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills' (ACARA, 2014c). To further emphasise this idea, the curriculum for each learning area contains a statement similar to the following:

If a teacher judges that a student's achievement is below the expected standard, this suggests that the teaching programs and practice should be reviewed to better assist individual students in their learning in the future. It also suggests that additional support and targeted teaching will be needed to ensure that students are appropriately prepared for future studies in Arts subjects.

(ACARA, 2014d)

Quite clearly, if we look beyond the superficial differences, the basic philosophical underpinnings of the Australia Curriculum bear a strong resemblance to the philosophical base from which Spady developed his concept of an outcomes-based curriculum. It is in the application of these ideas to the development of detailed curriculum documents that the two approaches differ. However, these differences are not as great as they first appear.

From his three basic premises, Spady developed four **essential principles of OBE**. The first principle, referred to as **clarity of focus**, is that education systems should be organised so that teachers and learners can focus clearly, consistently, systematically and creatively on the significant outcomes that learners need to demonstrate successfully. If this happens, teachers can focus on helping learners to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will enable them to achieve the significant learning outcomes that have been determined before instruction starts. The achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum (particularly those for Year 2 and beyond) consistently use terms such as explain, analyse, interpret and evaluate – all clear demonstrations of learning that require understanding. These standards can provide the starting point for the clarity of focus that Spady was advocating.

Spady's second principle of OBE is often referred to as **designing down** or **designing back**. This principle requires that once the long-term significant outcomes have been defined, they become the starting point for curriculum design. All instructional decisions are then made by tracing back from this desired end result and identifying the building blocks (referred to by Spady as enabling outcomes) that will progressively take learners closer to this end result. In this way, the outcomes (rather than content) define the curriculum. This does not mean that curriculum design becomes a simple linear process, but it does mean that there should be a direct link between all planning, teaching and assessment decisions and the significant outcomes that students are ultimately to achieve.

If this approach were to be taken in a school education system, it would mean that the starting point for all curriculum design would be a set of significant outcomes that all students were to achieve by the end of their compulsory schooling (Spady would refer to these as exit outcomes). These outcomes would then have to be used to derive a set of substantial outcomes for each learning area. Within individual subjects, programs would be developed to enable students to achieve the learning area outcomes. In turn, units of work would be developed to enable students to achieve the program outcomes.

Finally, lessons would be developed to enable students to achieve the outcomes of each unit. Outcomes at the lesson, unit, program, subject and learning area level would all be seen as enabling outcomes that gradually led students towards achievement of the exit outcomes. Curriculum strategies, such as integration of students with learning difficulties and literacy across the curriculum, would have to be interwoven with this hierarchical web of enabling outcomes.

The Australian Curriculum does not take this approach, at least not explicitly. However, the end result of the two curriculum design processes may not be very different. Whether or not the curriculum designers used a process similar to Spady's 'designing down', the final Australian Curriculum documents contain both content descriptors and achievement standards that are organised hierarchically. The knowledge, understanding and skills that students develop at each level provide the foundation for the next level of learning, and assessment processes linked to the standards should ensure that students have achieved the required learning before progressing to the next level. This progression of learning may not be immediately evident in the content descriptors but it is illustrated very clearly in the achievement standards, as shown in the following extracts from the History achievement standards (ACARA, 2014f):

- By the end of Year 1, students explain how some aspects of daily life have changed over recent time while others have remained the same.
- By the end of Year 2, students analyse aspects of daily life to identify how some have changed over recent time while others have remained the same.
- By the end of Year 3, students explain how communities changed in the past.
- By the end of Year 4, students explain how and why life changed in the past, and identify aspects of the past that remained the same.
- By the end of Year 5, students identify the causes and effects of change on particular communities, and describe aspects of the past that remained the same.
- By the end of Year 6, students identify change and continuity and describe the causes and effects of change on society.
- By the end of Year 7, students suggest reasons for change and continuity over time.
- By the end of Year 8, students recognise and explain patterns of change and continuity over time.
- By the end of Year 9, students refer to key events and the actions of individuals and groups to explain patterns of change and continuity over time.
- By the end of Year 10, students refer to key events, the actions of individuals and groups, and beliefs and values to explain patterns of change and continuity over time.

Achievement standards such as these contain the essential information that Spady suggested should be included in outcome statements – they state what it is that students are expected to be able to do (explain, analyse, identify, etc.) with the knowledge, understanding and skills that they have learned.

Spady's third principle of OBE is that teachers should have **high expectations** for all learners – they should expect all learners to achieve significant outcomes to high standards. This is probably the most overlooked principle of OBE, particularly by critics who want to claim that OBE lowers standards. When this principle is applied, depth of understanding and intellectual rigour are not reserved for a few learners – they are

expected of all learners. Consequently, teachers cannot rely on norm-referenced assessment to give them the false sense of security that comes from knowing that some students are learning well; they need to use criterion- or standards-referenced assessment to provide clear evidence of how well each student is learning.

This concept is embedded in the achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum through the descriptions of significant achievements at each Year level. The idea that all students should be achieving these standards is implied and, as outlined below, the curriculum documents contain specific statements about what should be done for students who do not achieve the standards to the expected level.

Spady's fourth principle of OBE is that teachers should strive to provide **expanded learning opportunities** for all learners in recognition of the fact that not all learners can learn the same things in the same way or in the same amount of time. Spady based this principle on the belief that most students can achieve high standards if they are given appropriate learning opportunities, and that what really matters is that learners understand the things that are important, not that they learn them in a particular way or by some arbitrary point in time. He advocated that teachers should give students diverse opportunities to learn and be flexible in their approaches to assessment. This principle is often misrepresented and stated as 'no student ever fails'. This is *not* what Spady intended – this principle was intended to draw attention to the fact that learners are all different and teachers need to take this into account and, as far as is practical, provide the necessary learning opportunities for all learners. The philosophy behind the Australian Curriculum is clearly consistent with this principle.

If the arguments presented above are accepted, the philosophies underlying the Australian Curriculum are not significantly different from the philosophies underlying outcomes-based education. This is important because, to a greater or lesser extent, most current State and Territory curricula also embody similar beliefs about schooling. This should mean that teachers can make a reasonably smooth transition from teaching according to their current curriculum to teaching according to the Australian Curriculum. No dramatic paradigm shift is required, particularly for teachers accustomed to a standards-referenced approach to assessment.

## DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Interview an experienced teacher and ask them to explain the decision-making process that they use to get from the broad content guidelines in the curriculum to specific learning goals for each lesson. Compare their approach with the outcomes-based education approach described above.

## Teaching strategies

It is particularly significant that the Australian Curriculum documents do not mandate specific approaches to teaching. Although they are quite prescriptive about what should



be taught, the documents provide only broad guidelines on how teachers should help students learn. The Australian Curriculum: English puts it this way:

The content descriptions in the Australian Curriculum: English enable teachers to develop a variety of learning experiences that are relevant, rigorous and meaningful and allow for different rates of development, in particular for younger students and for those who require additional support ... it is expected that appropriate adjustments will be made for some students to enable them to access and participate in meaningful learning.

(ACARA, 2014c)

The Australian Curriculum: History puts it this way:

The skills of historical inquiry are developed through teacher-directed and student-centred learning, enabling students to pose and investigate questions with increasing initiative, self-direction and expertise ... Students' interest in and enjoyment of history is enhanced through a range of different approaches such as the use of artefacts, museums, historical sites, hands-on activities and archives.

(ACARA, 2014e)

In the absence of specific guidelines for teaching individual topics, teachers need to use initiative in selecting teaching strategies that are appropriate for the content and the students. The suggestions made in the remaining chapters of this book provide a solid foundation for these choices.

## CONCLUSION

All States and Territories have agreed that they will adopt the Australian Curriculum. The timetables for its introduction vary, as do the transition arrangements from previous curricula. As the curriculum is implemented, the State and Territory curriculum authorities will maintain their autonomy and their control over assessment and reporting. However, across Australia, there will be a clearer focus on equipping students with a common set of skills, knowledge and capabilities that are seen as necessary for their futures beyond school. It will also be much easier for students (and teachers) to move across State boundaries with minimal disruption to their learning (or careers).

The outline of the Australian Curriculum presented in this chapter, and the explanation of how it reflects many of the principles of outcomes-based education, should help you to see that most decisions about planning, teaching and assessment should be guided by four simple questions:

- 1 What do we want students to learn?
- 2 Why do we want students to learn these things?
- 3 How can we best help students to learn these things?
- 4 How will we know when students have learned what we want them to learn?

The first two questions are fundamental to curriculum design and answers to them are quite specific in the Australian Curriculum. Once the broad answers to these questions have been incorporated into the curriculum framework, teachers have the task

of answering them more specifically as they prepare for their day-to-day teaching. This process of transforming curriculum guidelines into plans for specific lessons is discussed further in chapter 4.

The third question leads teachers to consider what teaching strategies they will use to provide appropriate learning experiences for students. This is the focus of chapters 6 to 14 of this book.

The fourth question is at the heart of assessment of student learning. The achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum provide a starting point for answering this question but the specifics of assessment are beyond the scope of this book. Guidelines for assessment are provided in Killen (2005).

## REVIEW AND REFLECT ON YOUR LEARNING

Develop answers to each of these questions and discuss your answers with another teacher education student or with an experienced teacher.

- 1 What are the benefits of having a school curriculum that is designed specifically to prepare learners for their life after school? What are some of the reasons why such an approach to curriculum design might cause concern for some parents?
- 2 From the curriculum for a subject you will teach, identify a series of statements that illustrate the hierarchical progression of learning from Year 1 to Year 10 (similar to the history example presented in this chapter). How should this progression of learning influence the way teaching changes from Year 1 to Year 10?
- 3 Review the Year Level Descriptors for literacy in the English curriculum. How well do these descriptors match your expectations of the levels of literacy required in a subject (e.g. Science) that you will teach?
- 4 Develop a brief explanation that you could use to help parents understand why the cross-curriculum priorities have been embedded in the Australian Curriculum. What might be the particular challenges of integrating the cross-curriculum priorities into the teaching of your specialist area?
- 5 Develop a brief explanation that you could use to help parents understand why the general capabilities have been embedded in the Australian Curriculum. What might be the particular challenges of integrating the general capabilities into the teaching of your specialist area?
- 6 Review the Australian Curriculum for a subject you will teach and identify the ways in which it is similar to (and different from) the way in which that subject was taught when you were at school. How will these similarities and differences influence the way you teach your specialist subject?
- 7 Consider your own experiences as a learner (at school or university). Did you always learn as quickly as other learners? Did you always like to learn in the same way as other learners? When you were successful in your learning, what difference did this make to your interest in the subject and to your willingness to try to learn more? Which teachers encouraged you to learn the most and how did they do it? What do these things tell you about how you should teach?
- 8 When you are learning something new do you always 'get it' from just one learning opportunity, or are there times when you need a second chance? As a teacher, how will you provide these 'second chances' for your learners? What advice would you give to a teacher who said that he or she did not have time to provide students with expanded learning opportunities?
- 9 How should teachers go about defining appropriately high expectations for students' learning in your specialist area?

## WEBLINKS

- Documentation for the Australian Curriculum can be viewed and downloaded from **<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>**.
- Digital resources to support the Australian Curriculum are available on the Scootle website at **<http://www.scootle.edu.au>**.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in New South Wales are available at **<http://syllabus.bos.nsw.edu.au>**.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Queensland are available at **<http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au>**.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Victoria are available at **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au>** > AusVELS.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Tasmania are available at **<http://www.education.tas.gov.au>** > curriculum procedures.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in the Australian Capital Territory are available at **<http://www.det.act.gov.au>** > curriculum implementation.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in the Northern Territory are available at **<http://www.education.nt.gov.au>** > Australian Curriculum.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in South Australia are available at **<http://www.sa.gov.au>** > curriculum and learning.
- Information and support materials for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Western Australia are available at **<http://www.scsa.wa.edu.au>**.
- The full texts of Spady (1994) and Spady (1998) can be downloaded from **<http://eric.ed.gov>** by searching for documents ED380910 and ED420116.

Visit **<http://www.cengagebrain.com>** and search for this book to access the study tools that come with your textbook.

CENGAGE **brain**.com

