

Primary curriculum

As a response to the Eltis Report, *Time to teach, time to learn*, the NSW Board of Studies has attempted to address teacher concerns about an overcrowded curriculum. At first it proposed “Mandatory Outcomes” which would have resulted in half the content of the HSIE, Creative Arts, Science and Technology and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education syllabuses becoming optional. These seemingly arbitrary decisions about the core curriculum were rejected by education and community interest groups and the Office of the Board of Studies was forced to reconsider this proposal. Many will remember that TCFNSW opposed this approach to curriculum restructuring because it disenfranchised students from essential learning in many of these learning areas.

Foundation learning statements

The new proposal, not subject to widespread consultation, has been adopted by the Board of Studies and disseminated to schools. It is a statement of foundation learnings where the stage statements from each syllabus have been modified to provide descriptions of student learning for the end of each stage. They provide a focus for school reporting and can guide assessment, but there is much controversy about whether or how they can be used for planning and programming and what the status is of the subject matter within each syllabus.

In this regard, two answers appear to be developing: one for the schools in the non-government sector and another for government schools. The accompanying documentation from the BOS indicates that teachers can choose outcomes to meet the needs of their students. Clearly this gives permission for not all outcomes and associated subject matter to be treated. Schools/teachers could omit what they do not consider important for their students.

New Department policy

At the same time, the Department issued a new policy, *Planning and programming and assessing and reporting to parents*. This policy makes it clear that the syllabuses and their requirements remain the focus of planning and programming and to support this approach the Connected Outcomes Groups (COGs) have been published. These COGs link related outcomes from the four learning areas, HSIE, Creative Arts, Science and Technology and PDHPE. They provide one way of programming the primary syllabuses so that students have the benefit of all the essential learning from all the syllabuses. They cover the Foundation Learning Statements and more by providing planning to cover the whole curriculum. They are not mandatory and schools are not obliged to replace what they currently do with the COGs. But for many schools they will provide the integration they have been looking for and help solve issues about overcrowding. They are available on the intranet and not available to non-government sector.

Planning and programming

One of the dangers of the use of the Foundation Statements for planning and programming is that they are so broad that essential learning can be overlooked or worst deliberately omitted because a school or teacher simply does not want to teach it. COGs ensure curriculum coverage and allow the Government to assure the community about what is taught at least in government schools.

The COGs are developed around themes derived from the syllabuses and these themes run across the stages making the COGs multi-staged. Each COG has a unit of

work for each stage thus providing a comprehensive program for primary schools. The links with literacy and numeracy are explicit so that the teaching of English and mathematics can also be at least partially integrated.

However, the COGs and the COG units are not mandatory and government schools, providing they follow the outcomes and content of the syllabuses can continue with their existing programs. What the implementation of COGs does is allow schools to assure their communities about their coverage of the curriculum and the emphasis being given.

Teaching

As well as having the COGs and the COG units available, government schools have been working with the *Quality Teaching* to evaluate their teaching practice and assessment tasks. The *Quality Teaching* initiative provides teachers with a summary of the research and literature on pedagogy in a form that allows reflection on teaching practice and assessment tasks. This material is immensely useful and teachers have been able to reflect not only on their own practice, but to work with other teachers to provide useful feedback on teaching. This is very powerful material to reassure teachers about their practice and to provide information on areas for improvement.

Unfortunately, some teachers have taken this material and used it to provide yet another layer of programming by trying to write all the elements of the dimensions into teaching programs or by using these elements as some form of planning matrix. The material was developed for teacher reflection not planning. If in reflecting on lessons some elements are not as present as desired then some adjustment to practice and possible programming might be needed.

Assessing

While the OBOS will provide some support for assessment practice in all schools, the new policy in government schools makes it clear that assessment is to be an integral part of teaching and learning. The COG units provide assessment strategies and criteria for marking as part of the units. Depending on the task, the link between the assessment strategy and the criteria is not as clear as it could be. Focusing on the task and the criteria might have produced a better outcome for how assessment is represented in these units.

Reporting to parents

Schools in both the government and non-government sector have been caught up in funding requirements from the Australian Government related to reporting to parents. Most systems have now established minimum reporting formats to which schools can add their own additional information. The emphasis has been on reporting in a form that is generally understood by parents and involves a generic A-E scale and some reporting within cohorts. Schools are now coming to terms with these proposals and adjusting or redesigning their reports.

For Christians in all schools, changes in these important areas provide an opportunity to be involved in the education of students.

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