

# Balancing prescriptiveness and flexibility in the school curriculum

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## Introduction

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This paper is one of three research ‘backgrounders’ to support the 2018–19 review of the New South Wales (NSW) curriculum. It focuses on the issue of prescriptiveness or flexibility in curriculum, which has been identified as an area of interest in the review. The Terms of Reference require the review to consider the *appropriate scope for school community choices about content*. Given that the NSW curriculum is characterised by a relatively high level of prescriptiveness (Isaacs et al., 2015), this is understood as involving consideration of whether a more flexible approach may be desirable. This paper therefore seeks to provide an evidence base, based on a rapid review of relevant research, to inform reform towards greater curriculum flexibility.

Exploring possibilities for reducing prescriptiveness requires a clear understanding of what forms prescriptiveness may take, and how it might be lessened. It is therefore instructive to explore what the research literature suggests about how flexibility and prescriptiveness in curriculum might be conceptualised, based on theory and international best practice. This will help to establish a clear view of the possibilities, to make the issue more manageable for reform.

The optimum level of prescriptiveness in a curriculum is not something that can be easily determined on the basis of desktop research. Overall, the research indicates that education systems move continually between greater and lesser levels of curriculum prescriptiveness over time, and that myriad factors influence the amount of flexibility that is appropriate at any given moment. Savage (2018) argues that prescriptiveness versus flexibility—or uniformity versus diversity—constitutes an ‘age-old tension in curriculum’ that can never be fully resolved:

If the pendulum swings too far towards uniformity, then the curriculum risks becoming too inflexible and difficult to tailor to local needs; whereas if the curriculum swings too far towards diversity, it risks becoming so fragmented that it loses its ‘core’ and becomes meaningless (Savage, 2018, p. 248).

For Savage (2018), the solution to this tension appears to be constant responsiveness to stakeholder views and the political context, to determine the direction of the next swing.

This paper begins by examining what may be meant by flexible curriculum, followed by a brief summary of relevant perspectives from the substantial body of theoretical curriculum research. It then moves to an empirical focus, exploring what kinds of outcomes might be achieved through more flexible curriculum, for students, teachers, and school communities. The next section canvasses recent examples of flexible curriculum reform to identify lessons for reform design and implementation. The final section draws insights from the previous sections into considerations for the NSW Curriculum Review in determining an appropriate level of curriculum flexibility.

This paper is limited in that it aims to build a research base for a particular potential reform direction, without considering other current debates in curriculum reform. Curriculum studies is a broad and ‘deceptively complicated’ field (Yates, 2011, p. 3); and while this review covers prominent research relevant to curriculum flexibility, it does not claim to represent a comprehensive review of scholarship in this area. It may nevertheless be hoped that it provides a policy-relevant foundation for stimulating further discussion throughout the review.

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## Defining curriculum flexibility

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Curriculum is itself a term which does not have a stable definition in research (Steiner, 2017), and which means ‘many things to many people’ (Marope, 2017, p. 25). For Sockett (1976), curriculum may be conceptualised as either a plan of activities undertaken by teachers and students towards the achievement of certain learning outcomes; or the actual activities themselves. Other definitions constrain curriculum to ‘what students should learn’, without necessarily including guidance as to what activities they should undertake to learn it—as exemplified by the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2018, para. 1). Marope’s (2017) definition of curriculum is broader still, as a ‘dynamic and transformative articulation of collective expectations’ (p. 10); expectations that she argues may be met in both formal and non-formal learning contexts.

Given this fluidity, Sockett (1976) suggests that curriculum is best defined in any way that serves the author’s purpose. The purpose of this paper is best served by observing that each definition presented above carries within it a different assumption about the level of flexibility or prescriptiveness that a curriculum might entail: that is, in whether the activities defined by the curriculum are planned or actual; in whether the curriculum defines activities at all, or only the outcomes that they should achieve; and in whether these outcomes are to be achieved within a defined institutional context (schools), or in any context in which learning might occur. Decisions about the flexibility of a curriculum are therefore intrinsic to how the concept itself is defined.

There are many ways of considering the level of flexibility that any curriculum (however defined) may contain. Broadly speaking, flexibility in curriculum may relate to *what* is taught, and *how* it is taught. Because curriculum almost always involves the definition of some sort of learning content or objectives, the flexibility in *what* is taught is likely to relate to the detail and structure of this content, and how these objectives fit together. Flexibility in *how* the content is taught may relate to the presence or absence of prescribed teaching and learning activities, as well as the level of choice afforded to schools, teachers, and students in implementing them.

Bernstein (1975) provides a useful model for understanding this distinction, by describing two dimensions on which the design of a curriculum can be appraised:

- The first dimension is *classification*, or the strength of delineation between content areas: either clearly delineated content or subject areas, or integrated content.
- The second dimension is *framing*, or how specifically the processes by which curriculum is taught are described.

Bernstein (1975) defines framing in terms of student and teacher autonomy; that is, ‘the degree of control teacher and student possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship’ (p. 80). Framing also concerns what may and may not be taught; that is, the strength of the boundary ‘between the everyday community knowledge of teacher and taught and educational knowledge’ (p. 81). A curriculum may be rigid in one of these dimensions, but fluid in another: for example, a curriculum may have tightly-defined discrete subject areas, but considerable flexibility in implementation.

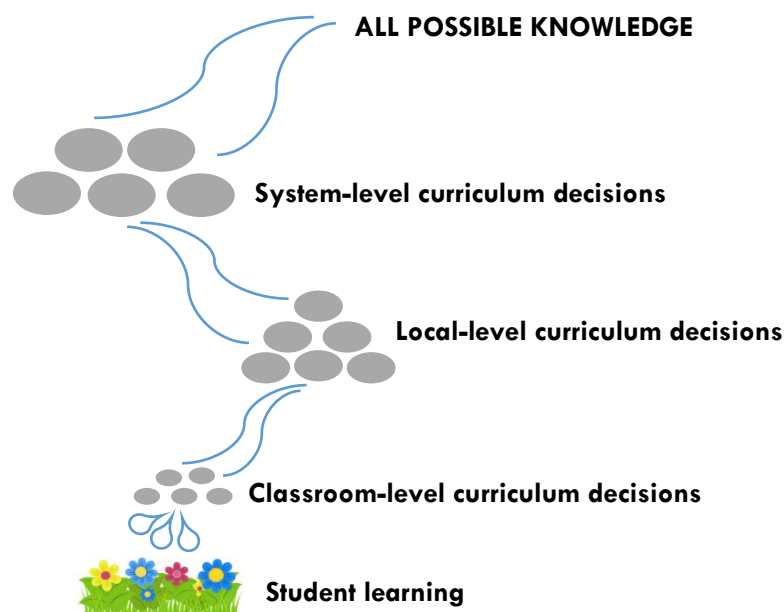
Flexible curriculum also has everyday meanings arising from its use in practice. In Australia, the term is often associated with alternative education settings or Flexible Learning Centres (FLCs), which are specialist education services that provide an alternative to mainstream schooling. These settings typically provide a ‘flexible curriculum’ that incorporates the interests of young people, while remaining linked to national curriculum frameworks or Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses (Macdonald, Bottrell, & Johnson, 2018, p. 3). While a broader view of curriculum flexibility is taken in this paper, this common use of the term is instructive as a reminder of the reasons why curriculum flexibility may be important in meeting the needs of all students.

Flexible curriculum has another everyday meaning, which encompasses a suite of pedagogical approaches that enable a greater degree of student autonomy than traditional didactic instruction. This may include activity-based, inquiry-based, or project-based learning, either within a specific subject area, or integrated across disciplines. While these methods are valuable tools in teachers' repertoire of learning approaches, it is not the intention of this paper to conflate curriculum flexibility at the system level with 'flexible curriculum' in the classroom. To advocate any particular pedagogical approach as part of a shift towards greater flexibility would be counter-intuitive—although a shift towards greater flexibility at the system level will inevitably create more opportunities for this kind of classroom-level flexibility to occur.

This calls attention to the multiple points in the education system at which prescriptiveness or flexibility in curriculum design and implementation may be exercised. Goodlad and associates (1979) describe several layers of curriculum decision-making within an education system:

Curriculum planning goes on wherever there are people responsible for, or seeking to plan, an educational program. When state legislators pass laws regarding the teaching of the dangers of drug abuse, the inclusion of physical education, or requirements outlining the time to be spent on given subjects, they are engaging in curriculum planning. When local school boards decree that reading will be taught according to a hierarchy of specific behavioural objectives, they are involved in curriculum planning. When school staff decide to use television broadcasts as a basis for interesting students in current events, they are engaged in curriculum planning. When individual teachers decide to use selected library books for enriching language arts offerings, they are involved in curriculum planning (Goodlad et al, 1979, p. 27, in Deng, 2012, p. 32).

Each of these levels creates or constrains the opportunities for decision-making that are possible at subsidiary levels. Figure 1 illustrates this as a river, in which the flow of knowledge is controlled by the constraints that various actors add (or remove) at different levels.



*Figure 1: Flow of curriculum decision-making*

Although Figure 1 oversimplifies the process of knowledge transmission (for example, knowledge may also flow 'upstream'), it helps to visualise how the flexibility or prescriptiveness of curriculum at system level is mediated at local and classroom level. It also helps to conceptualise the value of both prescriptiveness and flexibility: while flexibility facilitates the flow of knowledge, prescriptiveness helps to manage this flow into achievable expectations for students, teachers, and schools. The challenge for flexible curriculum reform is to unblock this flow to enable innovation, without drenching teachers and schools with unmanageable possibility.

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## Theoretical perspectives on curriculum flexibility

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The tension between prescriptiveness and flexibility has a long history in theories of curriculum design. Barrow (1984), in summarising early developments in curriculum theory, identifies two broad schools of thought: the theory of ‘grand design’ (p. 51), in which curriculum is seen as a comprehensive blueprint for school education; and theories that regard curriculum as more fluid and emergent. There are countless gradations and variations between these two theoretical extremes; a situation that endures in curriculum commentary to the present day.

Amongst the ‘grand design’ theorists, Taylor (1911) is notable for his enduring impact on school education. Taylorist views of grand design are based on the principle of scientific efficiency; essentially that if all teachers deliver the optimum curriculum content in the optimum ways, then student learning will also be optimised, just as a factory might optimise production. Remnants of this way of thinking can be seen in the ‘what works’ agenda, and the assumption that optimal methods for education can be identified, which will yield optimal results if all teachers apply them. This model frames the teacher as a technician, implementing optimised processes to the best of their ability; and the student as raw material, on which these processes exert their effects.

Critiques of Taylorism—or the ‘industrial’ model of education—are now widespread. Masters (2018), for example, criticises the ‘industrial model’ of curriculum, in which students are moved through levels of schooling as if on an ‘assembly line’, regardless of their actual progress in their learning (para. 4). Stoller (2016) goes further, and argues that the focus on ‘learning outcomes’ in the current educational climate is itself a Taylorist approach, which restricts students’ creative capabilities and their ability to reach their unique potential. Paradoxically, the quest for efficiency in schooling has perhaps had the opposite effect, in that the system designed to work optimally for everyone works poorly for any students outside a narrow middle band.

Advocates for more flexible curriculum tend to recognise that diversity and uncertainty are inevitable aspects of teaching and learning. It is therefore sensible to design systems that accommodate this diversity, rather than seeking to control it. Sockett (1976) argues that the ‘grand design’ approach to curriculum may in fact be no more than an ‘aide-memoire’, given that what curriculum actually looks like, and how it actually works, will differ in every classroom (p. 33). He questions the purpose of delineating agreed aims, if the negotiation between shared and individual values is ‘a continuous and on-going matter’ in the classroom (p. 30).

Changes to how knowledge is created and conceptualised have added to the appeal of more flexible approaches to curriculum. Postmodernism has influenced curriculum by re-framing knowledge as socially constructed, contestable, and therefore ‘up for grabs’ (de Alba, González-Gaudio, Lankshear, & Peters, 2000, p. 9). The contestable nature of meaning also poses challenging questions about whether studies of formal curriculum retain their relevance:

Given the deconstructionist and poststructuralist impulse at the moment, it is possible to doubt that the contest over curriculum sites of action is really important. For curriculum can indeed be reinterpreted, text can be deconstructed, every prescription can be subverted, inverted, converted or perverted (Goodson, 1994, p. 13).

For Goodson (1994), the prescriptiveness of curriculum is best analysed by giving attention to the ‘social construction of prescription’ (p. 13), and the ‘chain of negotiation and transformation’ (p. 14) through which prescribed curriculum is translated into classroom practice.

Within this diversification, recognition of knowledge traditions outside the dominant mainstream has also increased, along with awareness of the exclusionary nature of uncontested assumptions in education. Matus and McCarthy (2003) are critical of any attempts by curriculum to suppress diverse understandings of social constructs such as culture, identity, race, and nation, by ‘imposing a program of homogeneity’ (p. 80). These views have found particular resonance with some Indigenous Australian commentators, as exemplified in this view from Rigney (2018):

Official syllabuses produced by the hegemonic culture block the participation of all people, sustain its leadership over subordinated groups and enable it to act as intellectual guardian of the 'western tradition'. Seemingly 'neutral', enacted settler curricula promote the social reproduction of an ambiguous collective identity that upholds an Australian form of Britishness and whiteness (Rigney, 2018, p. 190).

The desire for curriculum flexibility expressed by Indigenous Australians extends beyond recognition of alternative views of culture and history, to greater recognition of Aboriginal 'non-linear' forms of knowledge and pedagogy (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011, p. 211).

Boomer (1992) takes a practical approach to thinking about the consequences of changing understandings of knowledge for teaching and learning in schools. His influential work, *Negotiating the Curriculum*—which is based on his experience of education reform in South Australia—suggests that teaching and learning can improve if both teachers and students are more explicit about the values and assumptions that shape their constructions of learning. In this way, curriculum is not rigid, but *negotiated* in the space between different values-systems present in the classroom. Boomer's model of the negotiation process is shown in Figure 2. Importantly for this paper, Boomer's model shows that the planned curriculum is only one input (on the teacher side), in the process of negotiation through which actual teaching and learning occurs.

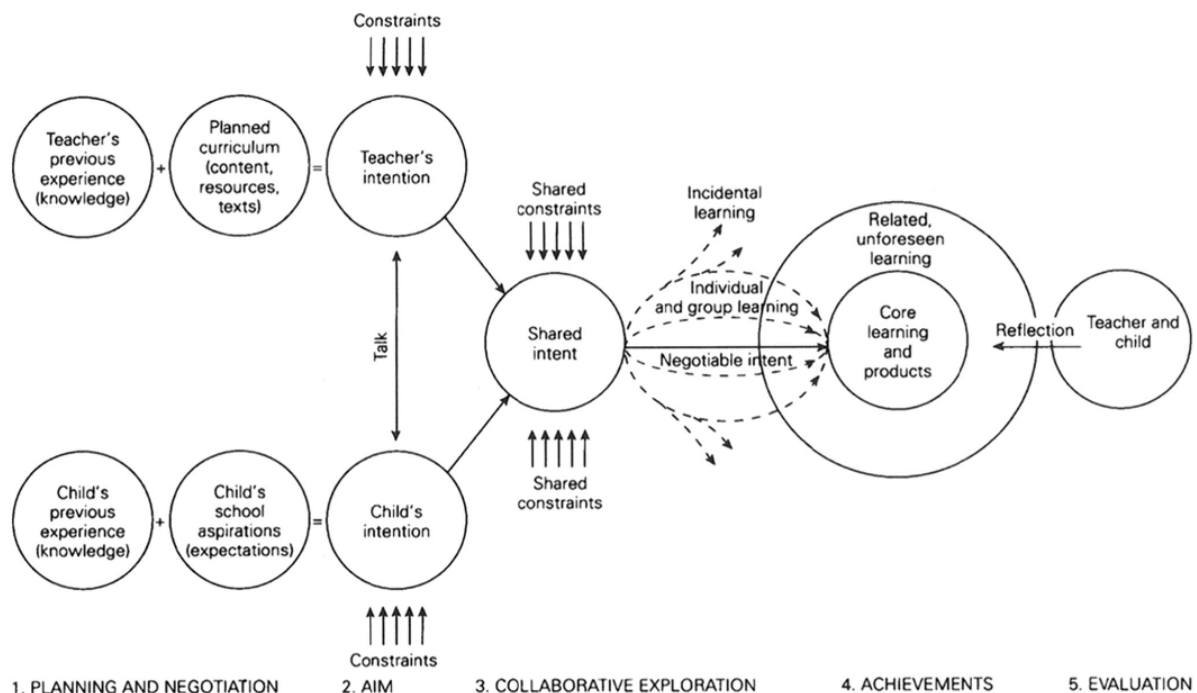


Figure 2: Boomer's model of curriculum negotiation

Source: Boomer, 1992, p. 10.

If curriculum is inevitably negotiated, prescriptive curriculum may appear almost redundant. However, it retains an unshakeable position in the 'social contract' of education, as a guarantee that the teaching and learning process will produce something of value to students and society:

Systems of compulsory general education are supposed to guarantee some kind of educational minimum, which would enable students to meet the needs of society not only regarding the demands of the labor market, but also capabilities of all people to...become involved in life-long learning (Laanemets, 2003, p. 286).

As Sockett (1976) acknowledged much earlier: ‘schools are highly complex institutions. But all institutions...must have shared aims and values. If they don’t, they simply collapse’ (p. 30). Decades of rapid change in how we understand knowledge and learning have not removed the need for curriculum; and have perhaps even increased its importance, as a point of stability and consensus in an increasingly fragmented and contested knowledge environment.

While this paper aims to offer a rationale for greater curriculum flexibility, it does so in recognition of the enduring value of structured expectations for teaching and learning in schools. Fox (1972) identifies two groups of approaches to curriculum design: one in which the learner is ‘an inquirer, a problem-solver, an activist’, with the teacher’s role being to create an environment for learning; and the other which favours ‘clarity and specificity of goal statements, identifying goal indicators, and pushing for the specification of more precise outcomes that can be measured’ (p. 135). For Fox (1972), these types of learning are not mutually exclusive but complementary, as an active learner may sometimes require structured supports to scaffold their understanding. The crucial factor is that both teacher and student are involved in the decision about what type of learning takes place. Flexible curriculum need not be defined as the absence of structure, then, but the possibility of choosing how much structure is required.

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## **Benefits of curriculum flexibility**

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Arguments for more flexible curriculum may be made on an empirical, as well as theoretical, basis. The relationship between more flexible curriculum and improved student learning outcomes appears tenuous, but positive. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2013) identifies flexible curricula as a feature of five high-performing education systems, although does not provide sufficient detail for causality to be confirmed. Suggett (2015) also reports an association between school autonomy over curriculum and student learning at the country level, but notes that the relationship at sub-national level (where multiple systems exist within a single country) is ‘slight’ and ‘far more complex’, influenced by many other variables (p. 11). Variation in the quality and depth with which differentiated curriculum is implemented may contribute to mixed evidence regarding its effects (Brennan & Zipin, 2018).

It may also be that the greatest benefits of more flexible curriculum are most clearly seen in outcomes that are not measured in tests of student learning. The research identifies many benefits of curriculum flexibility that contribute to student learning indirectly, while also having value in their own right. These are described below, for students, teachers, and school communities.

### **Benefits for students**

For students, greater flexibility in curriculum is associated with the following benefits:

#### **Increased capacity for entrepreneurial learning**

Recent decades have seen increasing interest in the role of education systems in fostering entrepreneurialism (or entrepreneurship). Although sometimes narrowly associated with commerce (Lackéus, 2015), the term is used here in a broader sense, as defined below:

[Entrepreneurially-minded learners are] learners whose curiosity leads them to seek out and identify or solve problems that are worth solving. They look at problems as opportunities, rather than as dead ends. They apply their creativity and talents to develop innovative ideas and solutions. They care about the quality of what they produce, embracing mistakes as markers for learning and improvement. They are energised by the potential benefits to others, locally or globally, from what they do and produce (Anderson, Hinz, & Matus, 2017, p. 7).

This definition incorporates many other general capabilities that are increasingly regarded as desirable outcomes of learning, including creativity, resilience, and critical thinking. By definition, entrepreneurialism requires possibility, even to the point of students becoming the designers of

curriculum themselves (Zhao, 2012). At NSW's Rooty Hill High School, where students pursue flexible, inquiry-based curriculum, students have become 'more collaborative, imaginative and curious', as well as more engaged in their learning (Bridger, 2017, para. 16).

### **Deeper learning through integrated approaches**

Increased flexibility in the organisation of curriculum can create possibilities for deeper learning than tightly-prescribed, content-driven approaches. Integrating subjects through project-based or inquiry-based learning can help students connect knowledge across contexts, and deepen understanding by applying new learning to real-world situations. Simply removing constraints on teachers' and students' time can be a catalyst for 'better and deeper learning' to emerge; and may in fact result in learning continuing beyond the school day, as students become increasingly engaged in the learning process (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 74).

### **Empowerment and agency**

More flexible curriculum can create space for students to feel empowered and in control of the learning process. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) describe how enabling students to set their own goals for learning 'takes the lid off' the classroom, compared to narrowly-defined curriculum expectations of what should be achieved in a year's time (p. 53). It can also help reposition students as active *producers* rather than passive *consumers* of knowledge (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014); and enable them to recognise and build on the knowledge that they bring from outside the school (Brennan & Zipin, 2018). Educators report students feeling 'appreciated and empowered' by curriculum that places their agency at the centre (MCPSTV, 2015, n.p.).

### **Keeping their options open**

Rigidity in curriculum can close off options to students prematurely, especially if formal tracking is applied. Tracking not only has detrimental effects of student retention and engagement, but can work to compound educational disadvantage by exposing less academically capable students to a less challenging curriculum (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015). Germany's remarkable turnaround in PISA results has been partially attributed to the cessation of early segregation of students into vocational and academic curriculum tracks, and the provision of a challenging, comprehensive curriculum for all students (Young, 2015). While NSW does not have formal curriculum tracking, there is a risk that informal tracking may occur, due to the strong emphasis on Higher School Certificate (HSC) preparation in upper secondary school. Students who are not bound for HSC may therefore be at higher risk of disengagement.

### **Enjoyment of school**

Perhaps the most important benefit of more flexible curriculum for students is that school becomes more enjoyable. This is well-captured by this superintendent of schooling in Ontario:

The emotion was palpable. It goes back to the co-learning stance – that is what you need. You need a sense of freedom, a sense of optimism, and you need a sense that experimentation is OK and that is how we learn (in Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 61)

Fullan and Langworthy (2014) contrast this enthusiasm with 'the hours, days, years and decades squandered on boredom and alienation' in more rigid models of schooling (p. 74). Such transformative narratives appear frequently throughout flexible curriculum research.

### **Benefits for teachers**

For teachers, greater flexibility in curriculum is associated with the following benefits:

#### **Professional respect and autonomy**

More flexible approaches to curriculum imply respect for teachers' professional judgement and autonomy. Although implementation of any curriculum involves some degree of teacher



judgement, teachers' sense of autonomy can be inhibited by prescriptive centralised regimes (Gallagher & Egan, 2012). Luke, Weir and Woods (2008) argue for a balance between teacher judgement and central control, which they label 'informed professionalism':

Informed professionalism involves teacher autonomy to interpret the syllabus, with opportunities for local curriculum planning, rich professional resources and development activities, school and classroom-based assessment capacity, and professional capacity to adopt curriculum for teaching and learning of identified equity groups (Luke et al., 2008, p. 2).

'Informed professionalism' may exist alongside some level of curricular prescription, with the research literature providing examples of teachers interrogating or adapting prescribed curriculum to fit their schools' unique approaches (Anderson et al., 2017; Wright, 2018).

### **Development of pedagogical content knowledge**

Another benefit for teachers of more flexible curriculum is the opportunity to build their skills in curriculum planning, and deepen their pedagogical content knowledge. Darling-Hammond, Wei and Andree (2010) identify the involvement of teachers in curriculum decision-making as one way in which high-performing education systems pursue rigorous teacher development. Conversely, rigid prescriptiveness can deter professional judgement, leading to 'de-skilling' of teachers over time (Luke et al., 2008, p. 10). Maintaining depth and agility in pedagogical content knowledge may be especially important as the availability of knowledge increases, and the need for teachers to deliver 'broad swathes of content' has been supplanted by the need for them to know how to support their students to master it themselves (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 34). This is not to reduce the value of the teacher's role, but to recognise that the complex power dynamics and knowledge flows in modern classrooms require expert handling (de Alba et al., 2000; Boomer, 1992), which an overly prescriptive curriculum can undermine.

### **Professional learning communities**

A third benefit for teachers is the enhancement of collegial relationships and professional learning communities. Flexible curriculum aligns well with the growth of collaborative cultures in school education, and of local ownership and engagement in education reform (Cowley & Williamson, 1998). Wright (2018) describes the collaborative implementation of flexible curriculum in one New Zealand school: 'since curriculum is regularly negotiated at all levels, staff learn from each other... communities of practice, of varying sizes and duration, thus emerge to meet short term, long term, personal and professional needs' (p. 61).

### **Meaningful workload**

An increase in curriculum flexibility may change the nature—if not the volume—of teachers' work. A recent study found widespread concern among teachers and school leaders about a compliance focus in the NSW education system (McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson, & Fitzgerald, 2018), with 86 per cent identifying compliance-oriented activities as having hindered teaching and learning in the past five years (p. 72). Compliance-oriented work was especially seen as an obstruction to spending time on differentiated curriculum. Frequent changes to syllabuses were also seen as burdensome, in the absence of meaningful professional development support. While flexible curriculum also demands considerable effort from teachers, this report suggests that teachers are likely to value curriculum planning more highly than compliance-oriented tasks.

### **Benefits for communities**

For local communities, greater flexibility in curriculum is associated with the following benefits:

#### **Strengthening the 'mediating layer'**

As the role of government has changed, so too has the role of local leaders and communities in interpreting and implementing education policy. McKinsey's analysis of continually-improving education systems pointed to the importance of a strong 'mediating layer' (Mourshed, Chikioko,



& Barber, 2010, p. 18), or local leadership group that can adapt centrally-determined policies to meet local needs. This echoes Fullan's (1994) theory of educational change, which positions local networks of teachers and school leaders as 'critical consumers' of policy (p. 1), capable of creative interpretation of central directives. When activated, these local networks can also produce powerful dynamics of mutual accountability, as teachers and school leaders motivate and challenge one another.

### **Unleashing local innovation**

A related benefit is the kind of innovation that can occur when local schools and networks are empowered to design an educational program that meets the needs of their community. This involves teacher professional autonomy being exercised at the collective level, when entire schools (or networks of schools) pursue innovative programs of school improvement. The research literature abounds with examples of individual schools and curriculum approaches that integrate flexibility within prescribed curriculum, including longstanding examples such as the Foxfire method, Central Park East School in Harlem, and Funds of Knowledge (Brennan & Zipin, 2018); and more recent examples such as Curriculum 2.0 (MCPSTV, 2015), or NSW's Rooty Hill High School and Hills School. Although these approaches are achieving results, they are often seen as occurring in spite of centralised decision-making, rather than because of it:

Some schools have shown that it is possible, even within a restrictive national curriculum framework, to have innovation as result of teacher professionalism leading to success for students (Gallagher & Egan, 2012, p. 80).

It is...refreshing to see that some schools and students aren't waiting for consensus among the warring parties on the best way forward. They are getting on with building an education framework based on innovation, passion and adaptability (Cawsey [Principal of Rooty Hill High School], 2015, n.p).

Greater flexibility in centralised decision-making may make it easier for more such exemplars to emerge, and make local innovation and responsiveness the norm, rather than the exception.

### **Community ownership**

Meaningful community engagement in curriculum design can only occur when there is sufficient flexibility to enable it. Community involvement in schooling is an especially prominent feature of Flexible Learning Centres in Australia, which are often 'place-based and focus on community participation' (MacDonald et al., 2018, p. 3). Importantly, this enables local cultures to be central to what happens within the school, not marginalised; a benefit that may be especially valuable for Australia's Indigenous communities, who may place a high value on local relevance:

For Aboriginal peoples the concept of a highly centralised, common culture, monolingual national curriculum is problematic. For more than 40,000 years distinct and diverse Aboriginal Nations controlled children's education, embedding local content and educational philosophies consistent with cultural and spiritual orthodoxy. This old-style Aboriginal education would have rejected a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in favour of enacted curriculum connected to 'The Dreaming', grafted from cultural self-identities, and mapped onto micro-environments on specific tracts of land (Rigney, 2018, p. 191).

Andersen (2011) adds that local solutions that are 'small, holistic, tailor-made and flexible' have proven effectiveness for Indigenous Australian students (p. 98; see also Shay & Lampert, 2018). Similarly, different perspectives on curriculum might exist between working-class and affluent communities (MacDonald et al., 2018, p. 3); or between rural and urban (Roberts, 2013). Given that educational disadvantage is disproportionately concentrated in certain communities in Australia, better opportunities for community engagement in curriculum has been identified as one of the most pressing areas for educational reform (Brennan & Zipin, 2018).

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## International trends

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The constant need to rebalance between prescriptiveness and flexibility can be seen in international trends in curriculum reform. At the turn of the new millennium, de Alba et al. (2000) found that the explosion of new perspectives on knowledge and learning was matched by policy and planning that 'seems intent on screwing them down more tightly and defining them more narrowly', including through more prescriptive curricula (p. 9). Prescriptive curriculum formed part of a global policy movement towards greater government scrutiny of schooling, alongside test-based accountability, standardised teaching and learning, and an emphasis on core literacy and numeracy (Sahlberg, 2011).

More recent reforms have seen the pendulum swing again, towards increases in curriculum flexibility. Ten years ago, Hargreaves and Shirley (2008) predicted an age of 'post-standardisation' in education, claiming that 'top-down prescriptions without support and encouragement at the grassroots and local level are exhausted', and standardised curriculum was part of a model that was 'on its last legs' (p. 136). The remainder of this section provides examples of education systems that have embraced the trend towards greater flexibility in different ways, with different levels of success. All have embraced the challenge of enabling flexibility, innovation, and teacher and student autonomy, while continuing to specify a clear body of knowledge and skills that students are expected to attain. These examples may help to identify system-level lessons that may guide NSW in taking similar steps in curriculum reform.

### Australia

Australia itself has been held up as a model of flexibility in curriculum, as curriculum has been interpreted by each state and territory government, around a broad set of national goals. Two decades ago, Cowley & Williamson (1998) compared Australia's approach with the 'overprescription' in England and Wales at the system level (p. 91). They noted that flexibility results in better learning outcomes from more contextualised curriculum; as well as better professional relationships between teachers, as they engage in collaborative innovation.

Since then, the Australian Curriculum has been developed to improve consistency of schooling for Australian students and reduce duplication of resources and effort (Yates, 2018). The national curriculum was nevertheless designed to retain a high level of flexibility, and 'permit adaptation to local contexts and student diversity' (Isaacs et al., 2015, p. 17). The Australian Curriculum's success in achieving this is reflected in some commentators questioning whether it should be called a curriculum at all (Berg, 2014; Savage, 2018); with Yates (2018) preferring to refer to it as a 'framework' (p. 138). This demonstrates the inseparability of the flexibility of curriculum from the definition of what a curriculum is in the first place.

Another notable feature of the Australian Curriculum is its intention to build on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia (Isaacs et al., 2015), which was developed in 2009 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The EYLF demonstrates a very high level of flexibility, encouraging educators to design an educational program around children's interests and ideas, towards the achievement of five holistic learning and development outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). The emphasis is therefore on vision, not detail:

[The EYLF] is what might be called a low definition document because it creates a vision of what is possible. It does this by providing a guide for professional decision-making without prescribing details of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Griehaber & Graham, 2017, p. 97).

Griehaber and Graham (2017) go on to describe the EYLF as exemplifying an understanding of informed professionalism that is 'more implicit than explicit' (p. 97); that is, the need for educator decision-making is implied without being explicitly guided. While this offers early childhood educators a very high degree of autonomy in designing their programs, it also places

heavy demands on their knowledge and skill; and has necessitated the production of many supporting documents and professional development programs to offer additional guidance.

## **British Columbia**

British Columbia (BC) was the subject of a recent ACARA case study in curriculum reform. A reduction in prescriptiveness is a significant feature of this reform, in response to a review which found a strong level of demand for greater flexibility (see BC Ministry of Education, 2013):

The redesign of the BCC [British Columbia Curriculum] is based on a commitment to greater flexibility for teachers and students to pursue their interests. Considerable responsibility rests with classroom practitioners to make professional decisions regarding breadth, depth and rigour in their programming, including the allocation of time to teaching the various disciplines (ACARA, 2018b, p. 5).

The BCC is ‘concept-driven’ (p. 5); and privileges ‘depth over breadth’ (p. 40). Educators are expected to focus on Core Competencies, and key content (knowledge), competencies (skills), and ‘big ideas’ (understandings) are specified for each year level (Learning First, 2018a, p. 8). At the same time, there is ‘a reduced emphasis on prescribed content and pedagogical direction’; which ACARA contrasts with the Australian Curriculum’s ‘considerably more prescriptive’ approach (p. 5). The relativity of curriculum flexibility is clearly evident in this observation, in that a curriculum described as too flexible to even be called a curriculum (see above) may appear prescriptive, compared to another contemporary example.

The flexibility of the new BCC flows through to other components of the education system. The BC government’s reform agenda is characterised by ‘high confidence and trust in the capacity of its teachers’, who are not governed by national or provincial performance standards (ACARA, 2018b, p. 40). This trust—along with a substantial program of support for teachers through professional development—may lie behind the ‘historic’ consensus between government and education stakeholders that surrounds the new curriculum, including among some longstanding adversaries (The Canadian Press, 2015, para. 10). The involvement of many educators in the curriculum design process, and a non-hierarchical relationship between policy-makers and practitioners, have also been factors contributing to this collaboration (Learning First, 2018a).

Recent reports also suggests flow-on effects to flexibility in assessment. A reduction in provincial exams signalled a trend towards easing-off of rigid testing (Lovgreen, 2016); although the province retains centrally-developed assessments (BC Ministry of Education, n.d.), adapted to align with the new curriculum (Learning First, 2018a). Subject-specific Graduation Examinations have also been pared back to literacy and numeracy only, opening up possibilities for diverse teaching and assessment strategies in the senior grades (Learning First, 2018a).

Overall, BC appears to be taking strides towards the Finnish model of education, which has long been characterised by high levels of trust in teachers, and low formal test-based accountability (Luke et al., 2008; Sahlberg, 2011). Early reports on implementation of the new curriculum suggest that innovation in schools is not yet widespread, and work remains to be done on engaging parents and the community (Learning First, 2018a). While recognised as a leader in curriculum reform, BC therefore confirms that such reforms take time to realise their potential.

## **East Asia**

East Asia includes many education systems that have historically performed well on international standardised tests, attributing their success to high levels of centralised control (Zhao, 2015). Nevertheless, these same systems are now pursuing greater flexibility in their curricula, to better equip students with the creativity and entrepreneurialism necessary for success in the future labour market (Zhao, 2015). This apparent ‘paradox’ (Zhao, 2006, p. 12), signifies the persuasiveness of curriculum flexibility as a global direction for education reform.

Singapore features prominently in country-level accounts of this trend in the region, as a system that has moved relatively rapidly through progressive phases of reform towards a student-centred, values-driven curriculum (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). In 2010, Singapore reduced the content of its curriculum by 10 to 20 per cent, 'in order to allow for a wider range of teaching approaches' (OECD, 2012, p. 126, in Brill et al., 2018, p. 14). As in other high-performing systems, respect for teacher autonomy and professionalism is a feature of Singapore's approach (Goodwin, Low, and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Brill, Grayson, Kuhn, & O'Donnell, 2015); alongside the creation of off-the-shelf materials to assist less experienced teachers where needed (Mourshed et al., 2010). Analyses of Singapore's reform trajectory suggest that it has successfully sustained a 'fine balance' between 'bottom-up innovation with top-down support' (Lim-Ratnam, Atencio, & Lee, 2016, p. 231).

China is another example in the region, where the recent trend towards more flexible curriculum provides a 'sharp contrast' to the previously heavily-centralised curriculum-making process:

For many decades, curriculum planning and development were exclusively the business of the central government, and local governments and schools were primarily responsible for implementing the curriculum handed down from the central government, without freedom to develop locally or school-based courses (Deng, 2012, p. 33)

China has shifted to a tiered approach to curriculum development, in which the central government retains responsibility for vision-setting and curriculum policy and guidelines; sub-national authorities develop plans for implementing national curriculum locally, as well as developing locally-based curricula; and teachers and schools work within national and local curriculum frameworks to develop specific courses relevant to their students' needs (Deng, 2012). This devolution has reportedly achieved favourable results, provided that teachers are engaged enough to make good use of their new levels of autonomy (Zhao, Mok, & Cao, 2016).

Other East Asian countries to embrace the trend towards more flexible curriculum include Japan and Hong Kong (Zhao, 2006); and South Korea (Hong & Youngs, 2016). Discussing teachers' views on South Korean curriculum reforms, Hong and Youngs (2016) add a cautionary note that 'participating teachers did not welcome the enhanced curricular autonomy nor did they believe it would diversify the school curriculum' (p. 20). They attribute this to the incompatibility of flexible curriculum with industrial arrangements for teachers' job security; and the prevailing credentialist culture. This shows that flexible curriculum, like any education reform, cannot take root in any education system unless other cultural and structural conditions are also in place.

## **Scotland**

Over the last decade, all education systems in the United Kingdom (UK) have followed a trajectory towards giving teachers and students greater flexibility in the content, design and pace of learning (Gallagher & Egan, 2012). Implementation of this trend has varied between UK systems, with Scotland standing out as a system with a high level of autonomy afforded to teachers (Gallagher & Egan, 2012). Wales has also introduced a new curriculum in 2018, and therefore offers a particularly recent example of contemporary directions in curriculum reform.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was formally introduced to Scottish schools in 2010, although the timeline from its official conceptualisation to full implementation spans from 2002 to 2016 (OECD, 2015, p. 37). During this time, it has been widely documented and reviewed, making it an instructive case study in curriculum reform. The most relevant issues from this body of research are summarised below, in terms of how CfE has addressed the issue of flexibility.

CfE is built around capacities and learning rather than traditional school subjects, and aims to foster greater 'ownership and creativity at school level' (Donaldson, 2014, p. 181). Beyond that, the exact nature of CfE is difficult to define, except in terms of its inherent flexibility:

Any simple capsule description will ignore its complex multi-dimensionality, and it risks confounding the aspirational ideal with the variety of implementation on the ground.

This is particularly relevant as regards CfE as it has deliberately moved away from prescription towards a curriculum that has to be built in the different learning settings all over Scotland (OECD, 2015, p. 38).

The suite of reforms that accompanied CfE add to the complexity involved in defining it, which included major reforms to teacher education and assessment, as well as teacher professional development. The OECD (2015) observed that CfE may be understood either as curriculum policy, or 'as an umbrella for an integrated package of arrangements and reforms' (p. 38).

While this flexibility has provided a frame for major system transformation, it has led to some considerable challenges in finding the right balance between autonomy and guidance for teachers. Maxwell (2017), former Chief Executive of Education Scotland, describes the tensions that arose early in the implementation process about the right level of centralised guidance:

The issue at that time was more about the lack of guidance, or a desire for more guidance, for schools. That resulted in a direct request for guidance, as part of deep discussions between the [CfE] management board and the implementation group around how to support schools and teachers in the process of developing courses, with the emphasis being very much on not providing a single national syllabus—Curriculum for Excellence is all about moving away, in a sense, from providing a one-size-fits-all national syllabus—but instead being on encouraging schools to develop courses that were suitable for their pupils and their local circumstances. CfE gives them that freedom (Maxwell, in Education and Skills Committee [ESC], 2017, n.p.)

The result was that Education Scotland co-ordinated with other agencies to support teachers by 'helping them with their workload by giving them ideas and guidance on exchanging course material that they might want to use in developing their own courses over the coming period' (Maxwell, in ESC, 2017, n.p.). This 'guidance' has reportedly run to over 20,000 pages—with questionable levels of awareness of its availability among Scottish teachers—resulting in the need for a 'decluttering' process as part of more recent reforms (ESC, 2017, n.p.).

A more positive feature of CfE is the strong level of stakeholder consensus on which it is based. Development and management of CfE is overseen by the CfE Management Board, which includes representation from Local Authorities; teacher and head teacher associations; national bodies; the National Parent Forum of Scotland; and teacher education colleges and universities (OECD, 2015). Teachers and system leaders are reportedly highly engaged and committed to the reforms, and have welcomed professional development, and efforts from government to reduce 'excessive bureaucracy' (p. 9). This consensus has a historical base—Donaldson (2014) remarks that the relatively small size of the Scottish education system has historically yielded a high level of curriculum convergence, even when this has not been prescribed by government.

The challenge for CfE now appears to be harnessing the potential of flexibility to stimulate local innovation. The OECD (2015) found that Scotland had not yet established the structures for professional collaboration at the local level that would enable local authorities to fulfil their role as the 'engine room' of curriculum design, supported by guidance from centre (p. 109). This demonstrates that an easing of prescriptiveness at the centre must be accompanied by active growth of new curriculum development structures and professional communities at the local level. Local leadership may be more effective in filling the vacuum of direction than a plethora of centrally-developed guidance, which may have limited connection to teachers' working lives.

The relationship between CfE and assessment is also worthy of attention. Another of the OECD's (2015) recommendations in its review of CfE was to improve the balance between formative, classroom-based assessment, and assessments that could inform system-level monitoring and planning. In 2017, Education Scotland introduced the Scottish National Standardised Assessment (SNSA), which is designed to provide a common point of reference to help teachers understand student learning progress. This new assessment program retains the high level of teacher autonomy that characterises the CfE package of reforms, as SNSA is designed to be delivered flexibly at any time of the school year. It is also not part of any formal accountability system,

with system-level data using a locally-customised combination of SNSA results and teacher judgements (Education Scotland representatives, personal communication, 5 July, 2018). The widespread adoption of SNSA in 2017—despite its implementation not being compulsory—suggests that this approach has found favour with the Scottish education community.

Lessons from Scotland are currently being applied to curriculum reform in Wales. The Welsh curriculum was reviewed in 2014, with the finding that it had become ‘unwieldy, overcrowded and atomistic’, in a way that was inhibiting teachers’ and students’ ability to apply learning to real-life situations, and creatively integrate issues across subject boundaries (Donaldson, 2014, p. 35). Donaldson (2014), who was also involved in setting direction for the Scottish reforms, suggested that Welsh curriculum reforms be based on a principle of ‘subsidiarity’; that is, ‘encouraging local ownership and responsibility within a clear national framework of expectation and support’ (p. 99). A new curriculum is therefore being developed in Wales, to be trialled in April 2019, through which ‘teachers will have more freedom to teach in ways they feel will have the best outcomes for their learners’ (Welsh Government, 2017, para. 4).

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## Considerations in effective curriculum reform

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This section draws together lessons from the theory and empirical research above, to identify key considerations in implementing reform towards more flexible curriculum. Australian governments have a strong history of being active architects of curriculum reform. In a recent study, Yates (2011) found over 100 curriculum reform documents at state level over 40 years, and 15 more at national level; concluding that ‘authorities have felt some obvious need to keep having new goes at it’ (p. 4). She observes that these ‘new goes’ have been characterised by increasing length and complexity in government-authored curriculum documents, as governments have sought to make their mark through increased intervention.

At the same time, debates about curriculum are situated within broader debates about the appropriate role of government more broadly, which has arguably been trending in the opposite direction. The changing role of government, from provider to *enabler*, is a recent global ‘mega shift’ in public service delivery (Eggers & Macmillan, 2015, p. 24). This involves creating enabling environments for innovation, while maintaining accountability for desired outcomes.

This shift is not only driven by changing conceptualisations of the role of government, but of the kinds of citizens the state wishes to produce. Ball (2010) uses the term ‘heterarchy’ to describe new modalities of government that are ‘somewhere between hierarchy and network’ (p. 177), in which power flows both top-down through direction, and horizontally through cooperation. In a heterarchy, citizens are not positioned as passive consumers of policy, but as active, responsible, entrepreneurial, and cooperative (Ball, 2010). Success therefore becomes a shared responsibility between central planning, and local adaptation and implementation.

This modality of government can easily be applied to the education system. The importance of local networks in policy implementation and innovation has already been recognised above; implying that the most appropriate role for effective central government is to enable such networks to flourish. The international trend towards greater school autonomy is another manifestation of the same enabling trend across all public sector service delivery, towards ‘local autonomy, flexibility, collaboration and customised services’ (Suggett, 2015, p. 1).

If an enabling government can cause innovation to flourish, then the reverse is also true. In reviewing innovative practices in schools around the world, Fullan and Langworthy (2014) found some level of misalignment in most cases between innovative schools and their system settings:

In many, if not most, of the cases we have seen, new pedagogies are spreading without being fully aligned with formal curriculum, assessment and accountability structures. This puts teachers and students at odds with the goals of the system. The system works as a barrier to innovation. Instead, in systems where we see effective implementation of new

pedagogies, all conditions are realigned across the whole system to powerfully enable change (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 74).

This finding implies that schools have potential to be capable and responsive innovators, and that the best thing that governments can do is not to place barriers to innovation in their way.

NSW has embraced the school autonomy agenda gradually. Until the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* education reform program commenced in 2012, NSW education was characterised by 'a great deal of central control' (Isaacs et al., 2015, p. 26). As NSW schools have now assumed autonomy over matters such as staffing and budgeting, it may be timely to extend that autonomy to greater school-level control over the teaching and learning program.

At the same time, the historically strong role of the NSW government in education has its basis in a commitment to clarity and opportunity. Describing cultural differences between Australian states' approaches to curriculum, Yates (2011) attributes to NSW 'a concept of opportunity that comes through offering centralized provision, and stability and clear rules of the game' (p. 5). This may be contrasted with her observations of other states' curriculum cultures, including South Australia's longstanding focus on teacher professionalism; or Victoria's ongoing struggle to balance central direction with the autonomy demanded of a powerful private education sector. Navigating these contextual and cultural drivers is the art of successful education sector reform.

This section seeks to frame the NSW Curriculum Review's engagement with these drivers in terms of the features of successful curriculum reform in other systems. Each section highlights a key consideration in planning and implementing curriculum reform.

## Stakeholder engagement

Government relationships with stakeholder groups are part of the context in which curriculum reform occurs. In particular, subject associations can be a powerful political force in shaping curriculum. Discussing failed curriculum reforms in the UK, Gallagher and Egan (2012) note that advocacy from subject organisations about the importance of their subjects resulted in 'content-heavy, largely discrete subjects in the national curriculum' (p. 76), rather than a streamlined, integrated approach. Green (2018) also notes the effectiveness of professional associations as lobbying associations, drawing on Goodson's (1994) classic account of the 'complex webs of patronage and careers, status and reward' that surround such organisations (p. 267).

As a highly politicised area of the education system, effective stakeholder management is an essential component of successful curriculum reform. As Yates (2018) observes, increases to either curriculum prescriptiveness or flexibility may equally elicit a negative public response:

If there is too much detail or uniformity in what is prescribed, it risks a dead-hand on teaching practices and the experiences of students, so people call for less detail and rather broad principles. But if directions are framed as principles...many call for more clarity and detail of what these mean, and where and how they are to be put in place (Yates, 2018, p. 143).

The solution may be to ensure that any change is clearly justified in terms of its outcomes (both anticipated and actual); including outcomes for teachers and school communities, as well as student learning. Describing moves towards greater curriculum flexibility in Japan, Asanuma (2013) provides an instructive example of how evidence of sustained student learning outcomes exposed public objections to the reforms as being 'hyperbolic rather than factual' (p. 437).

## Vision

It is possible for governments to take a strong role in curriculum, without being overly prescriptive. Australia's *Melbourne Declaration* provides an example of governments making a strong public statement about what is to be done in schools, without making any prescriptions about how exactly it is to be implemented (Yates, 2018). Green's view of the curriculum as



primarily symbolic—'It is our epic poem, our grand narrative, our best account of who we are who we hope to be, and indeed of our past, our present and our future' (p. 265)—serves as a reminder of the importance that curriculum may hold as an exercise in cultural and social leadership, rather than as a prescribed program of activity. The most important role of state in curriculum may be to create this narrative, in consultation with stakeholders at all levels.

Curriculum as vision-setting reflects the state's unique role in fostering unity from the diversity of its constituents. Great care must be taken to prevent such vision-setting from reinforcing exclusionary majority views, and to take into account diverse perspectives on teaching and learning. Several commentators argue for the incorporation of meaningful perspectives from marginalised groups in curriculum, not simply as 'additive' views (Scarino, 2018, p. 21) or tokenistic inclusions (Matus & McCarthy, 2003). Instead, curriculum must provide opportunities for the diverse cultural knowledge from all students' lives to be given meaning and value (Brennan & Zipin, 2018). The incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in vision-setting is especially important—with the new British Columbia curriculum providing a recent exemplar of how this might be achieved (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). The growing internationalisation of curriculum provides another avenue through which a plurality of perspectives might be accommodated and explored in NSW's vision for schooling (Rivera, 2003).

## **Resourcing**

A vital component of the government's role in curriculum is providing sufficient resourcing for its implementation. The availability of resources is as significant a determinant of what actually happens in schools as the curriculum itself (Yates, 2018). In most systems with a high degree of school autonomy over curriculum, schools also have autonomy over resources; with very few exceptions (Suggett, 2011). The role of government in these systems may be seen as ensuring schools have enough funding to implement curriculum that meets their students' needs.

A fundamental consideration in resourcing curriculum is ensuring adequate and equitable access to the full breadth of curriculum options. Research suggests that equitable curriculum access is an issue that remains in need of remediation across Australia, including for less wealthy students (Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015); and rural students (Lamb, Glover, & Walstab, 2014). Although curriculum has not been a prominent issue in debates about needs-based funding in Australian schools, differentiated funding approaches may be required to recognise that some students require greater support to engage with curriculum than others (Roberts, 2013). As an example, all Australian states provide resources to support equitable curriculum access for students with a disability (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppler, & Sharma, 2013).

## **Accountability**

An increase in curriculum flexibility does not necessarily mean a decrease in school accountability. Governments retain an important role in ensuring that education delivers on the expectations of the community, and in providing schools with opportunities to demonstrate their impact on learning. The research literature suggests that schools with higher levels of autonomy over curriculum do better in systems with robust accountability structures, alongside other government enablers and supports (Schleicher, 2008; Suggett, 2015).

A clear tension nevertheless exists between increasing flexibility in the curriculum, and accountability structures that rely on standardised tests. Where tests are perceived as high-stakes, the narrowing effect this has on school curriculum is well-documented in research, as well as the 'impoverished experience of school curriculum' that results for lower-performing students, as school resources are directed elsewhere (Brill et al., 2018, p. 10). Similarly, Fullan and Langworthy (2014) identify 'standardised assessments that primarily measure content reproduction' as the single greatest barrier to curricular and pedagogical innovation (p. 9).

This presents a paradox: that accountability appears to constrain flexibility, while increasing the effectiveness of curriculum flexibility at the school level. It may be that the ‘devil lies in the detail’, or in the specific accountability measures that are applied. Fullan and Langworthy’s (2014) suggestion is to retain monitoring of student learning outcomes, but to do so through ‘greater clarity and precision of deep learning concepts, followed by valid new ways to measure deep learning outcomes’ (p. 9)—that is, the kinds of learning outcomes that more flexible curriculum can enable. Brill et al. (2018) also find that certain accountability measures have a more positive relationship with curriculum innovation, ‘given the right conditions’—namely, accountability through international standardised tests at the system level (p. 14).

As the flexibility in curriculum increases, it appears that governments will be well-served by investing in carefully-designed accountability systems that will support, rather than impede, the innovation and deep learning that is unleashed. Luke et al. (2008) describe this careful balancing as ‘informed prescription’ (which must co-exist with ‘informed professionalism’ on the part of teachers and school leaders, as described earlier in this paper):

Informed prescription entails an economical syllabus that maps out essential knowledges, competences, skills, processes and experiences, parsimonious and appropriate testing systems for diagnostic and developmental purposes and systems’ accountability, and a strong systemic equity focus on the potential of all learners to meet high expectations and standards (Luke et al., 2008, p. 1).

Accountability systems must also recognise that curriculum reform takes time to improve student learning (Mourshed et al., 2010). Systems must provide schools with sufficient time and space to test new curriculum approaches, then to use evidence to evaluate and refine them. In this way, standardised assessment becomes another tool in the curriculum innovation process, not a barrier.

## **Support for teacher professional learning**

A recurring theme in research about flexible curriculum reforms is the complexity of professional judgement that they demand from teachers. For example, Donaldson (2014) cautions that the ‘professional judgment and ingenuity’ demanded by the Scottish CfE ‘poses questions relating to the capacity of those involved to realise that policy intention’ (p. 184); Grieshaber and Graham express concern that the Australian EYLF ‘demands so much’ of educators with diverse qualifications (p. 90); while Asanuma (2003) pessimistically observes that ‘Japan’s contemporary curriculum reform is so drastic that it is plausible that many school teachers cannot follow its radical changes’ (p. 438). In Western Australia, the failure of outcomes-based education reforms has also been attributed to insufficient recognition of the complexity of the principles that lay behind them (Berlach & McNaught, 2007; Alderson & Martin, 2007).

Developing the complex skills required to implement flexible curriculum takes more than a one-off series of teacher professional development. As suggested in the Scottish case study above, it requires the development of active, reflective communities of practice, in which curriculum decisions can be attempted, evaluated, refined, and affirmed, through professional dialogue informed by local knowledge and practice. In the absence of collegial support, it appears that teachers may fall back on centralised direction, meaning that reforms towards more flexible curriculum do not have the chance to realise their full potential. Efforts to build a lively and well-supported culture of professional inquiry must therefore be central to any such reform.

## **Clarity of expectations**

A further component of successful curriculum reform lies in ensuring that teachers and school leaders have the greatest possible clarity about what is expected of them. Despite the importance of this principle to all education reform, the research suggests that it is often a point on which reform agendas flounder. Teachers and school leaders require clarity about where the boundaries of their decision-making lie, and what is involved in meeting systemic compliance

requirements. This clarity must extend to both explicit and implicit requirements; for example, teachers may struggle to confidently exercise autonomy over curriculum if their school is subject to other accountability requirements focused on content-driven standardised tests. Similarly, school leaders may constrain curriculum flexibility if they perceive that it will jeopardise the results of compliance-oriented inspections—a potentially relevant scenario in the NSW context. .

The provision of additional documentation does not appear to be a solution to the problem of clarity. Describing Western Australia’s experiment with outcomes-based education, Berlach and McNaught (2007) report that teachers were simultaneously ‘drowning under a deluge of convoluted documentation’ and ‘grappling with not knowing what to teach’ (p. 2). The reintroduction of a syllabus for WA schools in 2009 was reportedly greeted with relief about the ‘certainty and support’ it would bring to teachers (Australian Associated Press, 2009, para. 8). Similarly, Queensland’s Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) reforms were plagued by uncertainty as to whether the large volume of support materials were optional or compulsory, with approaches reportedly differing between regions (Mills & McGregor, 2016). In Louisiana, provision of curriculum resources was framed as a deliberate strategy to support—rather than constrain—teacher autonomy, by freeing them up to focus on pedagogy (Learning First, 2018b).

Clarity of expectations is better achieved through the development of a succinct, coherent ‘narrative’ about what the curriculum aims to do, and how these aims are to be achieved at all levels of the system (OECD, 2015, p. 20). Developing this narrative is no easy task, as is demonstrated by the plurality of views about what a curriculum is, and what it should aim to accomplish. Yet this is perhaps the most important task in curriculum reform, to give teachers certainty about their own role in the curriculum design and implementation process. It may also help to give the public clarity about the scope and boundaries of the role of schools, in transmitting an increasingly complex knowledge base to the next generation. While parents and communities need reassurance that schools will deliver what students need, teachers and schools need reassurance that they do not have to deliver everything (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Mediating between these expectations is a vital task for any curriculum reform.

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## Conclusion

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Potential increases to curriculum flexibility in NSW appear to be consistent with a global education policy trend. The exact path to increased flexibility can only be determined through the painstaking stakeholder consultations that have characterised successful curriculum reform in education systems elsewhere. This paper has offered a research-based rationale for reform to inform these discussions, and position curriculum reform in NSW within the wider evidence base regarding prescriptiveness and flexibility.

Curriculum reform cannot occur in isolation, and must take place alongside robust support for teacher professional development, and accountability systems that maintain safeguards without constraining innovation. In this way, a shift towards greater flexibility in curriculum may be seen as the linchpin of a broader recalibration of the role of government in the education system, from central direction to greater decision-making at local and school level. The growth of local professional learning communities has been clearly identified as an essential component of this shift, so that teachers and school leaders can support and challenge their colleagues. Building such communities is a long-term policy project, which may require many years to take shape.

The seeds of local ownership and innovation may be seen in the schools, teachers, and networks that are already implementing flexible curriculum approaches, even within prescriptive systemic settings. These innovators offer valuable lessons about what is possible, and what such approaches can achieve for teachers, students, and communities; as well as where the outer limits of flexibility may lie. Also valuable are the views of education stakeholders for whom curriculum flexibility may be daunting and unfamiliar, who may help to identify what kinds of supports would enable teachers to embrace more flexible curriculum confidently and effectively.

Neither is curriculum flexibility a panacea for the many challenges an education system may face; and its design must take into account the interactions between curriculum and other determinants of learning; including resourcing for schools, and disadvantage among students.

This paper has shown that the amount of flexibility in a curriculum can be understood and implemented in many different ways; but that getting it right has profound potential to impact on all stakeholders within an education system. As Gallagher and Egan (2012) observe, 'the role of the curriculum in successful school education is more profound than politicians, curriculum developers and policy makers understand', and there are no easy solutions to be found in the 'multi-faceted, contested, dynamic process' by which curriculum expectations are translated into professional practice (p. 81). A move towards more flexible curriculum may perhaps best be understood as courage on the part of governments to embrace this complexity in collaboration with teachers and schools, and not to seek to constrain it through the artifice of prescription.

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