Curriculum Restructuring in Queensland: The Implications for Teachers’ Work

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Background to the Study

The move to outcomes-based education and a centralised curriculum framework in Queensland is indicative of national and global trends. This curriculum restructuring is part of a broader trend to educational restructuring whereby schools are largely responsible and accountable for their own management. Educational restructuring in Queensland has been shaped by the implementation of such policies as Focus on Schools, The Leading Schools Program and now the implementation of syllabuses in eight key learning areas. The syllabuses were developed by the Queensland School Curriculum Council and will be progressively implemented over the next five years. The Years 1-10 Science Syllabus and Years 1-10 Health and Physical Education (HPE) Syllabus are currently being implemented.

At one level, a centralised curriculum framework appears to be in tension with Education Queensland restructuring policies promoting school based decision making and management, and in turn these contradictory tendencies can create dilemmas for teachers. On the one hand, the framework can be construed as providing scope for school based curriculum decision making and development, and so be consonant with these policies. Initially the purpose of the research study was to investigate this issue. However, through insights gained from my observations at a meeting of school curriculum leaders from a range of schools located in a particular school district of South East Queensland, it became apparent to me that these curriculum leaders were concerned not so much with contradictory tendencies between restructuring policies as the challenges the new framework posed for teachers, and the implications of these challenges for the intensification of teachers’ work (Hargreaves 1994). Challenges related to: an understanding of the meaning of outcomes-based education; a redefinition of planning approaches, teaching methods and assessment procedures; the emotional demands of change; organisational reconstruction; adequate resource provision.

The emerging challenges were of particular interest to a group of six principals in primary schools located within in a five kilometre radius of each other. The principals felt the challenges could best be confronted if the schools worked as a cluster in developing programs in response to the new syllabus documents. The focus of my research therefore moved to an investigation of the implementation of the Science and HPE syllabuses through school cluster planning and consideration of the implications for teachers’ work.

Cluster planning is in its formative stages and the paper will report on developments and research findings so far. Against this background, the paper will critique the idea of school cluster planning and consider its significance for curriculum restructuring and the circumstances of teaching.

Working as a Cluster

The principals were of the view that teachers are at the heart of change, and endorsed the idea of parallel leadership whereby classroom teachers play a significant role in school program planning and school cluster program planning. The sentiments of the group were encapsulated in the opinion expressed by one principal:

If you want changes in classrooms, then it is the teachers not principals in their offices that must make those changes.
At their initial meeting, the principals agreed that the preliminary stage of cluster planning would be organised around three workshops which would be attended by four teachers and a member of the administration team from each school. The purpose of the first workshop (held in early September) was to develop a shared understanding of what it means to work as a cluster to plan school curriculum programs, and to unpack the syllabuses and support materials. Prior to the second workshop (held in early November) participants mapped current practices, values, and levels of readiness and awareness of staff, then compiled an overview of schools plans. This provided a basis for deliberations at the workshop about the nature of a cluster planning framework. The third workshop to be held in 2000 will consider modifications to the framework in light of its trial application in the six schools.

Prior to the first workshop a survey was conducted by the writer in order to gauge teachers’ attitudes to the new syllabuses and the idea of school cluster planning, and to obtain their perceptions of factors that would facilitate implementation of the new syllabuses. All teachers in the six schools were given the opportunity to participate in the survey, and 167 teachers responded. Findings of the survey were presented to participants as a reflection of teachers’ recommendations, feelings, and concerns, and as a frame of reference in developing the cluster framework. Findings indicated that while 67 respondents felt comfortable about the new syllabuses, 90 were uneasy or concerned. Major factors held to influence feelings, either positively or negatively were:

- past experiences of change
- knowledge of syllabuses and planning procedures
- anticipated support and professional development
- presentation and organisation of syllabuses
- likely impact on work.

Teachers identified a number of barriers to implementation and also described factors that would promote successful change. Main categories and their constitutive elements to emerge from the analysis are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Major Barriers to Implementation

<table>
<thead>
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<th>KNOWLEDGE</th>
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<tr>
<td>o open-ended nature of the syllabuses</td>
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<td>o lack of understanding of outcomes based concepts</td>
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<td>o lack of understanding of implementation procedures</td>
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<th>ORGANISATION</th>
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<td>o establishing a committee to organise development of the programs</td>
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<td>o lack of communication and collaboration</td>
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<td>o developing a cohesive school program</td>
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<td>o staff and year level changes</td>
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SUBJECTIVE/EMOTIONAL REALITIES
- feeling deskilled
- sustaining energy and motivation
- workload
- stress

RESOURCES
- insufficient resources, support materials
- time: to develop understanding and confidence; to plan; to allocate sufficient attention to all the KLAs

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- inequitable inservice

Table 2 Major Factors Facilitating Implementation

VISION
- Clear, agreed expectations with total staff involvement

SCHOOL ORGANISATION
- Opportunities to network pre, during and post implementation
- Success sharing
- Communication

CURRICULUM ORGANISATION
- Clear, user friendly plans
- Guidelines for assessment and reporting
- Year level discussions and planning

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Sound inservice, workshops in school time
- Workshops to discuss concerns and misunderstandings, implement, back to inservice to discuss problems
- Professional assistance in class
- Ongoing support

RESOURCES
- Time for planning, trialling
A significant majority of respondents (N=131) were in favour of school cluster planning. While 144 teachers believed it was important for them to be involved in school program planning, a smaller number (98) wished to participate in planning at the cluster level.

Teachers expressed the view that involvement at the school level can

- enhance understanding and expertise
- promote commitment, involvement, and ownership
- build confidence.

Teachers were of the opinion that involvement at the cluster level provides opportunities to

- use time efficiently
- share workloads, expertise and resources
- gain insights into how teachers in other settings interpret and adapt the syllabuses.

In some respects, major categories generated during the process of data analysis (as presented in Tables 1 & 2) were conceptually similar to key elements which underpinned a conceptual framework developed by Crowther (1999) from a review of research which explored relationships between educational processes and educational outcomes. The framework, entitled *A Research Based Framework for Enhancing School Outcomes*, is based on five aligned elements of successful school design namely, strategic foundations, authentic pedagogy, infrastructural design, cohesive community, and professional supports. The framework is premised on the view that:

...optimally successful school achievement occurs when the school's vision is clearly focussed on a specific and concrete ideal; when their exists cohesive support from staff, and the broader community for that ideal; when the organisational structures of teachers' work support that ideal; when pedagogy is directed at that ideal; and when system supports are available to facilitate that ideal (Crowther 1999, p.6).

As principals intended to use the *Research Based Framework for Enhancing School Outcomes* as a theoretical frame of reference in developing a school cluster planning framework, and as there was a degree of similarity between the five elements of the framework and the categories emerging from the analysis of survey data, this framework was adapted to provide a conceptual overview of teachers' messages about workplace factors which contribute to successful implementation of the new syllabuses.

The adapted framework (see Figure 1) illustrates key elements of successful school achievement as they relate to the circumstances of teaching. In other words, the
framework presents these key elements from the perspective of teachers' messages about workplace changes that need to occur in order to successfully implement the new curriculum. In recognising the circumstances of teaching, the adapted framework adds another dimension to the process of achieving successful school outcomes.

The Significance of School Cluster Planning for Successful Syllabus Implementation

The Queensland curriculum framework for the key learning area syllabuses is based on the idea of outcomes-based education. Spady (1993) identified three forms of outcomes-based education: traditional, transitional, and transformational. In traditional outcomes-based education, curriculum content and structure remain the same but the focus moves to outcomes as related to skills and competencies. Traditional outcomes-based education is concerned with students' success in schools and ‘rarely challenges the nature of the school day, for example the time-defined structure of curriculum content’ (p.7). Transitional outcomes-based education is focussed on students' culminating capabilities, curriculum and assessment are organised around higher order exit outcomes. Higher order competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving and effective communication are emphasised and 'subject matter becomes more a vehicle to assist in the cultivation and integration of higher order competencies' (p.8). Transformational outcomes-based education is future oriented in that it is concerned with ‘the broad role performance capabilities of young people and their ability to do complex tasks in real settings, in real situations, relating more directly to life’ (p.10).

In certain respects, the curriculum framework developed by the Queensland School Curriculum Council can be aligned with Spady's conception of transitional outcomes-based education. The framework identifies a capacity for lifelong learning as a culminating outcome, and provides opportunities for students to develop the attributes of lifelong learners.

The Queensland school curriculum is designed to assist students to become lifelong learners. The overall learning outcomes of the curriculum contain elements common to all key learning areas and collectively describe the valued attributes of a life long learner (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999, p.2).

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

- Equitable inservice
- Inservice in school time
- Workshops to discuss concerns and misunderstandings, implement, then back to inservice to discuss problems
- Ongoing support
- Professional assistance in class
The curriculum framework is underpinned by a learner-centered approach to learning and teaching where learning is regarded as 'the active construction of meaning, and teaching as the act of guiding and facilitating learning'. The approach sees knowledge 'as being ever-changing and built on prior experience' (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999, p.7). Assessment focuses on students' demonstrations of learning outcomes, and is held to be effective and efficient 'when embedded within a learning and teaching sequence' (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999, p.43).

Major concepts for each of the key learning areas are organised into strands while level statements summarise learning outcomes at each level. These statements provide the conceptual framework for developing core and discretionary outcomes. Core and discretionary learning outcomes for each strand are presented in increasing order of complexity from levels 1 to 6. Core learning outcomes describe learnings considered essential for all students and describe what students know and can do. Discretionary outcomes describe what students know and can do beyond what is considered essential at a particular level.

The concept of transitional outcomes-based education as exemplified in the Queensland school curriculum has implications for the approach to curriculum planning at the school and classroom level, the way teachers teach, the way students learn, and the way students are assessed. Traditionally in Queensland, curriculum planning has been guided by educational objectives formulated according to content (that is, knowledge, skills, values, attitudes) to be learned. Content has been delivered through...
largely though a transmission teaching style. Pen and paper tasks have been the predominant method for assessing student learning.

An outcomes-based approach to curriculum planning relies on a process of designing down (Spady 1993) or backward mapping where the exit or culminating outcomes are the starting point for making curriculum decisions about what students learn and how students can demonstrate their learning. The following set of procedural questions (Table 3) provides one example of backward mapping as can be applied to outcomes statements at the various levels of the syllabuses of the Queensland school curriculum framework. The questions give some insight into the ways in which teachers have to rethink traditional approaches to planning, teaching and assessment.

Table 3 Procedural Steps For Outcomes Based Planning

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What will students be?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>What will students do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What knowledge/understandings, skills, values, do students need to develop?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>How can teachers scaffold instruction and organise learning opportunities in ways that enable students to actively construct these understandings, skills, and values?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How will students demonstrate what they know and can do?</td>
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Implementation of the Queensland school curriculum framework has significant implications for teachers’ work. Adopting an outcomes based approach will entail a reconstruction of professional knowledge, in particular a redefinition of planning procedures, teaching approaches and assessment practices. The nature of these changes are well captured in the following observation by Griffin (1998).

The role of the teacher must change. The role of assessment must change. The mode of curriculum delivery must change. The role of the teacher needs to change from the transmitter of information to a facilitator of learning. Assessment needs to focus on progress along predetermined continua of learning and changes in the learner. Curriculum needs to maximise the students’ opportunities to establish an enquiry approach to learning and to use a range of resources to lead the student along the most appropriate learning pathway to achieve the designated outcomes.

From his investigations of the implementation of profiles and outcomes-based education in 63 schools across Australia that ‘were positive about the use of profiles’, Griffin concluded that while teachers and administrators used the language of outcomes-based education (OBE) and profiles, ‘OBE is not widely understood at the classroom level’ (p.13). He believed professional development was a critical factor and identified a range of focus areas:

- Inquiry learning and student involvement;
Brady (1996) also recognised the magnitude of change associated with a move to outcomes-based education, and, following reviews of literature on outcomes-based education and teacher change, provided four major recommendations to implementers. Like Griffin, Brady underscored the importance of professional development in relation to each of the recommendations. In brief, the recommendations state:

- There is a need for a full understanding of the substantive nature of the change, what that change means, and the nature of change in general.
- There is a need to provide skills in implementing outcomes-based education, understanding that it entails new ways of developing curriculum in relation to content, method and assessment procedures.
- There is a need for ongoing support from State departments and regions after initiation to ensure effective implementation, achieving a balance between pressure to implement, and high quality assistance.
- There is a need to more fully take account of teacher attitudes and school cultures in implementing outcomes-based education.

(Summarised from Brady 1996, p.32).

When the sets of factors identified by Griffin (1998) and Brady (1996) are compared with those identified by teachers as represented in Figure 1, certain similarities are apparent. Teachers noted the importance of developing a shared understanding of the substantive nature of the new curriculum framework and its implications for their curriculum planning and practice. They also emphasised the need for professional development, various forms of ongoing support, and a collaborative work culture. Given that teachers’ ideas about factors related to successful implementation (as represented in Figure 1) will be a frame of reference in developing a school cluster planning framework, then it is possible that such a framework can inform a number of the issues referred to by Griffin and Brady.

Griffin (1998) referred to the critical role of professional development in introducing cultural change in schools to assist outcomes-based education, and Miller (1998) discussed what these cultural changes entail. According to Miller, reconstructing teaching from delivery of instruction and transmission of knowledge to teaching for understanding involves a fundamental reculturing of schools, that is ‘a shift from one set of assumptions, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and practices to another’ (p.530). Reculturing changes the conditions of teachers’ work in that it entails some fundamental shifts as illustrated below:
**From individualism to professional community:** Teachers are replacing the individualism, isolation and privacy of traditional classrooms in favor of new norms of collegiality, openness and trust.

**From teaching at the center to learning at the center:** The shift from 'What do I do as a teacher and transmitter of knowledge?' to 'How can I plan with others for what students do as learners?' means that student work determines the agenda for teacher work.

**From technical work to inquiry:** systematic inquiry, research, and reflection are at the core of teachers' work.

**From control to accountability:** Instead of working as individuals to establish standards of behaviour, teachers work together as colleagues to develop standards of learning to which they hold themselves and their students accountable.

**From managed work to leadership:** As leaders in their classrooms, teachers relinquish 'power over' their students in return for 'power to' affect improved student performance. Outside of their classrooms, teachers assume leadership roles as well. They gain responsibility in areas traditionally reserved for administrators – instruction, assessment, rules, procedures, and governance (Adapted from Miller 1998, pp.530-531).

Arguably the idea of school cluster program planning provides scope for reculturing along the lines described by Miller. Cluster planning, followed by adaptation at the school level, rests on collaboration among teachers, which, in turn, moves teachers' work away from the individualism and isolation of the classroom. A learner centered approach underpins the Queensland curriculum, and the expectation is that assessment be embedded in a teaching and learning sequence. School cluster planning and school site adaptation provide opportunities for teachers to work through the meaning of the new curriculum and develop a shared understanding of the implications for the way they plan and teach, for the way students learn and the way they are assessed. Considered in relation to Miller’s framework, school cluster planning can redefine teachers' work from teaching at the center to learning at the center and from control to accountability.

At the first cluster planning workshop, principals put forward the view that while the *Research Based Framework for Enhancing School Outcomes* (Crowther 1999), and the findings of the survey (Figure 1) were important frames of reference, developing and implementing the cluster planning framework was a reflexive, evolutionary process which relied on teacher research and inquiry. Furthermore, they underscored the importance of parallel leadership where their power is redistributed such that classroom teachers can assume an active curriculum leadership role beyond the classroom. In relation to Miller's framework, the ideas espoused by the principals provide scope for school cluster planning to redirect the circumstances of teaching from technical work to inquiry, and from managed work to leadership.

The idea of school cluster planning is significant in that it suggests possibilities for addressing issues such as those raised by Griffin (1998) and Brady (1996), and for reculturing teachers' work in the directions advocated by Miller (1998). The idea of school cluster planning may also be useful for policy makers.
In referring to reforms where there is an emphasis on teaching for understanding, Darling-Hammond (1998) underscored the need for policy makers to shift efforts from designing controls to developing capacity.

...if schools are to be responsive to the different needs and talents of diverse learners, they must be organized to allow for variability rather than assume uniformity...school reform efforts must focus on building the capacity of schools and teachers to undertake tasks they have never before been called upon to accomplish - i.e. ensuring that all students will learn to think critically, invent, produce, problem-solve (p.644).

Darling-Hammond referred to the importance of finding the right balance between ‘top-down and bottom-up decision making’ (p.652), and advocated approaches where policy makers delegated to local schools and professional associations decisions about teaching and learning processes and specific curriculum strategies, and created processes which allowed for ‘some local participation in standard-setting and assessment development’ (p.658). Furthermore, it was important, she believed, for policy makers to recognise that these processes require ‘time and opportunities for teachers to reconstruct their practice through intensive study and experimentation’ (p.654). According to Darling-Hammond, systems need to learn how to support successful practice in places where it exists and to encourage it in other places. This in turn means that ‘the assumption of hierarchical intelligence must be suspended' (p.658), and government agencies must themselves become learning institutions.

The Queensland school curriculum framework is a top-down change yet it provides scope for teachers to recognise situational realities and student diversity, and make decisions about how to plan for, facilitate, and assess student outcomes at the various levels. The framework, premised on the concept of transitional outcomes-based education and a constructivist theory of learning, presupposes a reconstruction of teachers’ professional knowledge and a reculturing of their work place. In this sense, the framework reflects Darling-Hammond’s idea that policymakers need to

...shift their efforts from designing controls intended to direct the system to developing capacity that enables schools and teachers to be responsible for student learning and responsive to diverse and changing student and community needs, interests and concerns (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p.643; emphasis in original).

While the Queensland school curriculum framework provides scope for teachers and institutions to develop capacity, just how this capacity is to be developed is left to individual schools and districts. It is at this level that school cluster planning engaged in by the six schools might provide insights for policy makers and inform them of strategies which can in turn be adapted by schools and districts in other locations.

Conclusion

Central to the Queensland school curriculum framework is the idea of student learning through the active construction of meaning. This paper has argued that successful implementation of the curriculum relies on teachers learning about
different approaches to curriculum planning, teaching, and assessment, and this in turn involves a reculturing of teachers' work. The process of reculturing recognises that teachers, like their students, learn through the active construction of meaning, and the paper has advocated the idea of school cluster planning to promote such reculturing. In this sense, the idea of school cluster planning reflects Darling-Hammond’s (1998, p.650) claim that: ‘The process of change is inherently constructivist.’

As the process of school cluster planning unfolds, further research to be undertaken by the writer will investigate (through observations, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions) the following questions.

- What strategies were used to develop teachers’ understandings of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the Years 1-10 Science, and Health and Physical Education Syllabuses?
- What structures were established to promote cross-site planning and collaboration?
- What strategies were used to develop teachers’ capacities to engage in cross-site planning and collaboration?
- What planning approaches were adopted to promote the development of cluster-relevant and site-specific curriculum programs?
- To what extent did teachers believe cross-site planning can promote professional learning, alleviate work-loads, and improve student outcomes?
- What were the contextual factors identified by teachers as enhancing or constraining cross-site planning?

Answers to these questions can provide insights about the potential of school cluster planning to enable teachers to engage with the new curriculum in a way that develops their professional capacity and ultimately promotes successful school outcomes.
References


