

THE CONVERSATION

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Curriculum review set to reignite the 'literacy wars'

AUTHOR



Stewart Riddle

Lecturer in Literacies Education at University of Southern Queensland

Kevin Donnelly, the conservative education critic who is set to review Australia's national curriculum, has a long history of partisan criticism of teachers, teaching subject associations, academics and the very curriculum he is tasked with reviewing.

In particular, Donnelly has been vitriolic in his criticisms of the English curriculum. He has claimed that it is driven by a leftist ideology, dumbed-down content and falling standards, which are due to the impacts of critical literacy, whole-language and a child-centred model of pedagogy. Donnelly has argued that the general capabilities, including literacy, undermine the curriculum.



The emphasis on grammar and language construction in the current national curriculum is stronger than in many previous state curricula. So why the attacks on it? AAP/Stefan Postles

This seems a rather heavy-handed criticism, given that the scope of the literacy capability in the curriculum considers literacy as:

... the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school.

However, according to Professor Barry McGaw, head of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which is tasked with implementing and maintaining the national curriculum, there is a stronger emphasis on grammar and language construction than in many previous state curricula.

While the current English curriculum is not perfect by any means, it has been developed in exhaustive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. They included English teaching associations, teachers, parents, universities, unions, sector and state education authorities over a number of years.

Perhaps more importantly, the English curriculum has not been in steady state implementation for long enough for a review to be of much value. While Queensland has taken up the curriculum through to Year 10, other states such as New South Wales have been much slower to begin integrating the new curriculum into their school systems.

Accommodating further changes before the current ACARA document has properly been tested would be wasteful of teacher time and effort that could better be spent on extracting the maximum value from the current document.

There has been a huge investment of time and goodwill by teachers and schools across the country to implement the Australian curriculum. To appoint two men who will engage in a quick-fire review of the entire curriculum devalues the work of thousands of educators across the country and gives encouragement to people who ignore curriculum change.

Donnelly believes that the Bible deserves a place in the curriculum, saying:

At a time when language is being debased because of the internet, SMS messaging and other forms of electronic media the language in the Bible is rich with imagery, rhythmical cadence and evocative imagery.

On literature, Donnelly argues:

Instead of being forced to study dreamtime texts and Confucian analects, a more convincing argument can be put that all students should encounter those literary texts that are part of the Western cultural tradition and that embody the morals, values, beliefs and sentiments that make us unique.

Donnelly claims that the review is about improving literacy and numeracy standards as Australia continues to lag on international literacy testing. However, it is too soon for recent results in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other tests to be attributed to the national curriculum.

In his own words, Donnelly would like to see us return to a:

... more traditional approach to English teaching, one where teachers teach, students learn and there is an agreed body of knowledge, understanding and skills that need to be addressed at each year level.

The credibility of both Donnelly and his co-reviewer Ken Wiltshire has been called into question, while serious concerns have been raised about the timing, turnaround and design of the review. These concerns have come from multiple groups, including teachers, academics, teacher unions, parents and state education authorities.

It seems ludicrous that education minister Christopher Pyne expects the review to be completed this year, with implementation in 2015. Anyone who has taught in schools would immediately realise this is an impossibility bordering on insanity. Curricula should be reviewed on a regular basis, but too much change in too short a time is wastefully disruptive and impedes the efforts of schools to deliver quality education.

In order for the review to have any meaningful purpose it needs to be headed by impartial, respected education professionals. Otherwise, we simply run the risk of once more reigniting the culture and literacy wars rather than making any improvements in the educational outcomes of Australian children.