



Introduction to the Australian Curriculum Sustainability Cross-Curriculum Priority

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The introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2011 and 2012 brought with it a variety of responses, from consternation from some states less willing to give up their autonomous curriculum positioning through to significant optimism from educators and academics about the opportunities and benefits afforded by such a national curriculum framework. For environmental and sustainability educators, and indeed all those educators across Australia who valued the power of education to contribute to making the world a more just and sustainable place, there was eager anticipation for the inclusion of sustainability as one of three cross-curriculum priorities. Positioned within the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), and consistent with calls from many scholars and practitioners in the environmental and sustainability education field from the previous decade (see for example, Kennelly et al., 2011; Skamp, 2010), such a clear and seemingly important positioning of sustainability within the curriculum was welcomed. After existing on the margins of schooling for too long, finally sustainability appeared to have a priority place in the curriculum.

With enthusiasm, educators, especially those linked to environmental and sustainability education, set their minds to developing learning experiences that were informed by the sustainability cross-curriculum priority (S-CCP) or weaving the principles of the S-CCP into existing teaching and learning initiatives. At a similar time, researchers were curious about the way the S-CCP was being received, perceived and implemented by schools. A national survey was conducted by the Australia Education for Sustainability Alliance (Australian Education for Sustainability Alliance, 2014) which gathered the views of teachers who were already engaged with Education for Sustainability (EfS) and of those new to sustainability or unaware of how

to implement the S-CCP into their practice. At a similar time we conducted a state-wide instrumental case study in Tasmania that investigated principals' and school leaders' understandings of sustainability, the extent to which the S-CCP was integrated into teaching and learning, and perceived issues related to receptivity and capability of teachers (Dymont et al., 2015; Hill & Dymont, 2016).

Almost a decade since the inception of the Australian Curriculum, this issue of *Geographical Education* focuses specifically on the cross-curriculum priorities. In this brief paper, we explain the key conceptual thinking behind the S-CCP, examine why it was included in the curriculum, and how it has been implemented in Australian schools since 2012.

The development of the Australian Curriculum, and therefore the cross-curriculum priorities, gained impetus from the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* which considered contemporary issues of relevance to young Australians along with identifying key skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for learners in the 21st century (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs, 2008). This defining moment in Australia's education landscape coincided with an increasing awareness of such global sustainability issues as climate change, social inequality and injustice, growing waste and pollution issues, deforestation, and species extinction. Within this context, it made good sense for sustainability to be included as one of three cross-curriculum priorities alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, and Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia.

The S-CCP supports students to develop 'the knowledge, skills, values and world views necessary to contribute to more sustainable patterns of living' (Australian Curriculum,

Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020). All the cross-curriculum priorities were built around key concepts, and in the case of the S-CCP these were: recognising interdependent and dynamic systems; respecting diversity of worldviews, values and justice; and building capacity to think and act for a sustainable future. These three concepts and the related nine S-CCP organising ideas are sophisticated and theoretically robust. If analysed against a well-respected framework for the conceptualisation of sustainability, such as Christen and Schmidt (2010), the S-CCP meets conceptual criteria for sustainability including identifying problems sustainability seeks to address, establishing the importance of intra- and inter-generational justice, recognising the integration of human-nature systems, proposing criteria for sustainability, and valuing transformation into action. As noted in Hill and Dymont (2016), the organising ideas 'unequivocally interpret sustainability well beyond the environmental . . . to embrace thinking and acting critically and systemically with regard to social, cultural, economic, political and ecological domains' (p. 227).

The implementation of the S-CCP in schools across Australia has been inconsistent, and there is little apparent effort at coordinated systematic research or evaluation at a national level of the S-CCP specifically, or the cross-curriculum priorities more generally. Early research into the S-CCP by (Australian Education for Sustainability Alliance, 2014) and Dymont et al. (2015) and Hill and Dymont (2016) reported the following similar findings. Teachers and school leaders generally agreed that sustainability was important yet there was a lack of understanding or capability about how to implement the S-CCP in classroom practice. Many teachers and school leaders reported a conceptualisation of sustainability as environmental which meant that the more complex organising ideas of the S-CCP were not well understood and therefore difficult to implement. These issues appear to be shared across other CCPs which have been critiqued for being overly complex, essentialised, and paternalistic or deficit focused (Maxwell et al., 2018; Salter & Maxwell, 2016).

Research suggests that teachers *see value* in addressing the CCPs and, in some cases, the S-CCP was welcomed and further consolidated in schools (Hill & Dymont, 2016) particularly for schools and teachers who were already engaged with sustainability, for example, through the Australian Sustainability Schools Initiative (AuSSI). There are also examples of innovative EfS practice across Australia which involve the voice and agency of students (Green, 2017) or that seek to weave different areas of the curriculum together such as sustainability and

the Arts (Hunter, et al., 2018). Yet too often the barriers to implementation, which were apparent in the early days of the Australian Curriculum, remain.

Lack of understanding and capability to implement the S-CCP has been a key issue, not helped by the lack of sustainability-focused in-service teacher professional development and initial teacher education courses (Dymont & Hill, 2015; Dymont et al., 2015). This is compounded by issues, reported in research relating to both the S-CCP and other CCPs, which include differences between state syllabi and the online Australian Curriculum (Gauci & Curwood, 2017), teachers' worries about tokenism or doing it incorrectly, and insufficient teacher resourcing and time. In addition, general curriculum overcrowding/assessment requirements do not leave room for the luxury of optional CCPs especially as there's 'no requirement in the Australian Curriculum that subjects be taught through the cross-curriculum priorities' (Salter & Maxwell, 2016, p. 297).

Weaving the S-CCP, or indeed any other CCP, into teaching and learning across different subjects or learning areas, is a highly complex undertaking. As we discussed elsewhere (Hill & Dymont, 2016), the cross-curriculum priorities might be seen as an oxymoron or even *strange objects* in the curriculum, in that they are apparently *priorities* yet they are not assessable and they are not compulsory curriculum inclusions. Nevertheless, as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, recently so disrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, there has never been a more important or urgent moment to rethink how education, and specifically the sustainability CCP, can contribute towards a more equitable, just, and regenerative world. The time is now.

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