THE OVERCROWDED CORE:
A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

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Introduction
The Curriculum Development Centre's discussion paper, 'Core Curriculum for Australian Schools', under a
forward by Malcolm Skilbeck, has been widely circulated and much discussed over the past six months. Most of
the discussion has centred around the definition of the notion of core curriculum and how it might be developed;
little appears to have been said so far about the implications of adopting a core curriculum as such, regardless of
how it might be defined and developed in detail. Thus, it is my concern here to raise some of the issues implicit in
the adoption of any kind of a core curriculum, rather than to continue the debate about the content of an
Australian core in particular.

One reason I think this paper is a particularly relevant contribution to the debate at this stage, is that a second
feature of the discussions in which I have participated, has been the discussants' exclusive concentration upon
what the document actually states, that is upon the authors' intended meanings. As I propose to consider some of
the possible but unintended outcomes here, it can be no refutation of the points I make below to argue that the
document actually states something different. The point I am making is that the statements of the document need
interpretation, and the way I have chosen to do this is to consider what is likely to eventuate from them in the world
outside the exegesis of academics. In that other world the CDC statements will not just one, but many
meanings, they will be taken out of context and manipulated by political, bureaucratic and ideological pressure
groups, and will perhaps produce a core curriculum quite contrary in its scope and procedures to the authors'
original intentions. Thus I am attempting in this paper to shift the whole debate out of the bounded context of the
CDC document, into the political reality of Education today.

In the forward Dr Skilbeck introduces the discussion document as an essentially liberal document, and it may be
seen to be such in at least four different but interrelated areas.

First, it is liberal in that it has taken a very broad view of what should be included in a core. It has firmly moved
away from the idea that a core merely consists of literacy and numeracy or that it consists of literacy and numeracy
plus science and social science, which is how the term core studies has commonly been applied in some Australian
states.

Second, it is liberal in that it allows for autonomy of individual schools within the notion of a centrally defined
core curriculum. For instance:

- It is important that the plan should incorporate student, parent and community perspectives and the stated needs and
  interests of students. Students, parents and community should participate in appropriate ways in the planning process itself.
  (p. 21)

Third, the document is liberal in the sense that it has moved away from the traditional conception of curriculum
as a package of learning materials, towards the inclusion of learning processes as an essential factor. This is clearly
stated:

- We need to find ways of incorporating processes and experiences which have no unique dependence on the particular
  subjects, but which should be approached in inter-disciplinary or non-disciplinary fashion. (p. 17)

This section on core learnings includes such processes as 'learning and thinking techniques', 'ways of organising
knowledge', 'values', 'forms of expression', 'interpersonal relationships'.

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My thanks to all who have commented on this article, especially the Curriculum Interest Group of Western Australia whose comments and ideas
are inextricably interwoven with those that appear here as my own.
Finally, the document may be seen to be liberal in the sense that it eschews testing, stating that, although some parts of the core may be tested, other parts are not testable in any way, and it would be a mistake to attempt to present the core as a set of required learnings which could be tested through a national or State testing program. (p. 15)

In these four respects, then, the CDC is overtly espousing a liberal view of a core curriculum. What is not so obvious however, is that the very nature of a core curriculum makes the document perhaps the most perniciously illiberal notion to enter current educational thought. This may be demonstrated by a closer consideration of the way in which the four apparently liberal features mentioned above could operate in the context of a core curriculum.

**Broadness**

The CDC definition of an Australian core curriculum is broad because:

... core curriculum cannot be reduced to the so-called “3 R’s” often termed “the basics”. Society requires more of its citizens by way of common, universal understandings and skills then reading, writing and arithmetic. (p. 4)

Thus, when we turn to pages 18 and 19 in the document, we find that there are 9 separate ‘areas of knowledge and experience’ to be included in the core. These are as follows:

1. Arts and Crafts
2. Environmental Studies
3. Mathematical skills and reasoning and their applications
4. Social, Cultural and Civil studies
5. Health education
6. Scientific and Technological ways of knowing and their social applications
7. Communication
8. Moral reasoning and action, value and belief systems
9. Work, leisure and lifestyles

When one considers the sheer quantity of learning contained in these nine areas, it becomes impossible to reconcile them with the statement that:

... to provide for a full and total education we need, in addition to the core curriculum, a wide range of specialist, optional, technical and advanced studies. (p. 4)

I have recently been examining the timetable of a typical senior high school in Western Australia and I find that the curriculum is already three-quarters compulsory for students up to year 10, and yet, even with the electives, not all the areas contained in the CDC’s ‘core’ are covered. How then is the wide range of other than core studies to be fitted in?

Obviously the CDC anticipate that some of what is at present taught in schools as compulsory will not in fact become part of the core, because the core is only to consist of the essential learnings within each of the subject areas. Thus, to implement a core this broad, will mean that subjects have to make optional much of what is at present compulsory. And that will have to be done, not to provide room for the optional studies, but simply to provide room for new compulsory core learnings.

Amongst the learnings suggested for environmental studies, for example, we find that the following are ‘required’:

... systematic knowledge drawn from such disciplines as biology, geology, landscape architecture, economics, etc., and the readiness by schools to participate in environmental maintenance projects which gives students practical experience in the field. (p. 18)

Just how much lesson time a week would the most minimal learnings in that part of Environmental Studies consume?

Consider also, the rate of learning of different pupils of different abilities from different backgrounds. The last time I saw a core curriculum operating was in social studies, and this is what the Head of Department had to say:

... all students have to do the basic stuff here, they have to do these readings and complete these work-sheets and assignments on each topic. When they have done that, they can go on to their own project work. ... some of the slow ones never finish the core ... (they) never get off these work-sheets.

A core as broad as that suggested by the CDC must consume most of the available school learning time, so those limited options which may be squeezed in will be available only to those who can quickly complete their core studies. It is therefore highly unlikely that these optional courses will be anything more than a token.

One response to this problem is to have several different cores, each catering for a different ability range, but an essential feature of any core curriculum is that it should be universal for all students, and this is precisely the position adopted by the CDC.

By core curriculum, we mean that set of basic and essential learnings and experiences which can reasonably be expected of all students who pass through our schools. (p. 4, bold print)
We can compare this statement to two others made in a different context:

"What kinds of achievement — in knowledge, skills, attitudes, understandings and so on — do the educators through whose system he will pass expect of him by this age? (eighteen) ... And what, roughly, is the minimum level of achievement expected of him in one item in this range?" (p. 1)

Basic minima are features of a compulsory curriculum. (p. 69)

Both statements are to be found in John White’s 'Towards a Compulsory Curriculum'.

The implications are clear: first, for ‘core curriculum’ read ‘Compulsory Curriculum for Australia’; and second, the apparently liberal stance of making this compulsory curriculum wide in terms of essential learnings, will simply mean in practice that all students in all schools will spend the vast majority of their time working through it. It also follows that ‘...core curriculum is compulsory, there will no doubt be ways of ensuring that it is taught, and education systems being what they are, the minimum is likely to become the maximum for many students, which is a feature of a compulsory curriculum explicitly advocated by White. (p. 71)

The first danger in the notion of a core curriculum, then, is not only that, once adopted, it could become the whole curriculum, but that it would become a universally taught compulsory curriculum with a few low-status electives.

**Autonomy**

The CDC appears to espouse the idea that local schools and communities can participate in decision making. We know how little participation goes on at the moment although we have almost no real curriculum requirements enforceable by law, and one can hardly see how a broad and universal core curriculum, centrally defined and which may be enforceable by law, is going to give individual schools more autonomy. If one considers the reasons put forward (6 and 7) for a core curriculum, one finds the main emphasis upon producing conformity in our schools, conformity of standards, conformity with regard to which pupil needs are met, limits to innovation, ways of spending less money on education, and, in my experience most often quoted, the need (hardly mentioned here) to enable students to transfer from one school to another intra- and inter-state. All of the reasons given in fact limit the autonomy of the local school.

However, a much wider consideration which should be brought to bear here, and will not be argued by people more experienced in the area than myself, is the question of whether it is in fact possible to formulate a universal core that is appropriate to all schools throughout Australia. One has only to look at the difficulties which have resulted from legislation in other areas of education. In WA, for example, it is a legal requirement that English be the language of instruction in schools. There are excellent reasons for this essential minimum requirement, and it is precisely the kind of requirement of which a core would consist. But as well as the obvious benefit that all Australian children learn English, it unfortunately means that migrants and Aboriginals are taught to read in their second language. Thus, not only does the process of learning to read become an exceedingly difficult task, but the ability to read in their own language cannot be used to further any other aspects of their education.

The problem of teacher mobility, which is serious in the ‘difficult’ and country schools where one would expect an individual curriculum suited to the local needs, would be exacerbated by a national core curriculum.

If teachers were to become expert in teaching a particular core, and bearing in mind the fact that few teachers in our State stay in a country school for more than three years, then it is hardly likely that they will ever modify it to make it meaningful to particular local children. One should ask whether the core curriculum which is appropriate to the needs of city dwelling Australians could ever be equally appropriate to the needs of country pupils, or whether in fact country and ethnic minority group pupils will be severely disadvantaged. It is the learning situation of many of the pupils in this latter group which inevitably makes them slower learners, and hence, as I have suggested above, they are likely to do nothing but the core studies, despite their especially great need for a more individual curriculum.

A final point on autonomy: schools do not generally employ the autonomy they at present hold. Amongst the many reasons for this (particularly in WA) is the fact that a centralised Department produces large quantities of teaching material, syllabuses and guidelines. The Department does not aid or encourage individual teachers to produce their own curriculum variations outside the guidelines and there is a promotion system which ensures a high rate of turnover in schools, particularly country schools. One result is a profession which expects to be told what to teach. Why then should we imagine that the core curriculum, the most centralised curriculum yet to be mooted for Australian schools, will be handled any differently? Hardly surprising that Dr Skilbeck reports being asked by teachers what CDC is going to do about the core next; or that at a recent discussion the one Primary Principal present made the point that Principals ‘want to be given firm guidelines and clear indications’ about what they should do. The core curriculum is the least likely kind of curriculum to cater for local opinion and needs.

This is the second danger: that the little autonomy at present available to (or exercised by) schools will be removed from those who most need it.

**Processes**

The idea that a core curriculum would include certain learning processes is totally unrealistic. All the evidence hitherto shows that teachers (and indeed State Departments) see the curriculum as being a collection of syllabuses, or worse, a collection of teaching materials.

It is quite clear how teachers will handle the idea of core learning processes. I recently saw a science lesson in which the teacher was drilling answers to ‘The Web of Life’. I have been evaluating a project which requires teachers to allow students to discuss in small groups, and have found that even when teachers are using material
requiring a small group discussion approach, they still use chalk and teacher talk. The sad fact of the matter is that teachers will be expecting the core curriculum to be a series of syllabuses and materials, which will then be taught by the methods that teachers are accustomed to using.

Consider the document itself: less than half of one page is given to learning processes, two and a half pages to the areas of knowledge and experience and none of the learning processes are dealt with in any detail. If it is as difficult as I suspect it is to define and describe the relatively accessible and explicit knowledge and content of a core curriculum, then the much more elusive and implicit learning processes are more likely to end up in the too hard basket, either at the planning or the implementation stage.

The third danger, then is that, whilst the core curriculum appears progressive and liberal in regard to teaching processes, when implemented it will be conceived and taught in terms of its knowledge content alone; this will be so because it will be conceived fundamentally around the content: processes can be ignored, and they will be.

**Testing**

Although the document says in at least three different places that an aim of the CDC version of the core curriculum is to discourage and limit testing, I believe these statements to be either duplicitious or politically naive. In fact, rather than providing a means to limit testing, the core curriculum simply opens up further areas in which tests may be seen to be necessary, and some of the CDC assertions to the contrary are, to say the least, weak. Consider the following statement:

> We must avoid the tendency to reduce the core to that which can be tested at a time when tests are severely limited in what they can measure.

As the history of testing bears witness, the time when a test is perceived as being an adequate measure is more a matter of who wants the information than the adequacy of the test. Did the inadequacies of the test cause Sir Cyril Burt to stop testing, or did he and his colleagues go on to found a whole (tripartite) system of education upon it?

However, there is current supporting evidence for the inherent danger of nationwide testing programs, from both Australia and overseas. Consider, for instance, the Assessment of Performance Unit in Britain and the surreptitious manner of its genesis. Simon (1979) demonstrates that whatever the APU says should or should not be done with the test information, it will be a simple matter to derive from it league tables of reading, numeracy or writing scores for different schools and areas throughout the UK. Similarly, in the specifically Australian context, Fensham (1980) warns of some of the likely outcomes attendant upon the present ACER program. I believe that the climate in Australia is such that tests will be devised should a national core curriculum materialise, and that they will be administered, however great their limitations. That, in spite of what the CDC document explicitly states, is the political reality.

Any core curriculum is the ultimately testable curriculum, because the fact that the designers purport to have produced the core of essential learning offers the ultimate justification for intensive and repeated testing of the whole core. After all, if the learnings are so essential should we not ensure that they are in fact being learned? Testing is bound to ensure from the adoption of a core curriculum, and when it does, teachers will teach to the test, the tests will only assess certain learnings in particular ways, subject status will be determined by test weights, and the public and bureaucracy (in the belief that the tests enable them to compare one school, one teacher, with another) will have total control over our schools. That is the fourth danger.

The obvious and legitimate question to pose the author of this article is what alternatives are there to the core curriculum which will ensure that all Australian schools do make available to their pupils essential learnings?

One way of answering is to question whether a compulsory core is necessary, or whether it already exists informally. As in scientific experimentation it is often considered to work to disprove a null hypothesis, so in curriculum an approach to the collection of evidence upon which to judge the necessity of a core would be the useful exercise of producing a 'Null Curriculum' (Eisner 1979). In *The Educational Imagination* he points out that there are at least three quite different curricula in any school: that is the 'explicit' or 'formal' curriculum, which is usually written, is the most often talked about, and generally passes for the whole curriculum; there is the 'implicit' curriculum which may be equated with aspects of the 'hidden' curriculum and which consists of unplanned, unintended and often unrecognised learning outcomes; and there is the 'null' curriculum, which may be conceived as what is not to be taught, and is an essential consideration if any certainty about the value of the explicit curriculum is required.

What is produced by the formulation of a null curriculum is, for instance, Eisner's argument that the 'most productive modes of thought are nonverbal and alogical', but that these are seldom taught explicitly or learned implicitly because school curricula are almost solely concerned with thinking 'mediated by word or number' (p. 84). Thus it follows that the only way to test the comprehensiveness of a curriculum is to not only approve what is included, but also to approve the exclusion of what is not to be learned. A National Null Curriculum would both reveal the extent to which schools were not already providing a core curriculum under our present system of commonsense, materials and guidelines, and tell us a great deal more about what could also perhaps be taught.
Ultimately, the degree to which the present curricula of different schools do have a core of studies in common, is simply a matter of the extent of the core learnings. At a very basic level, there is a universal core. Consider mathematics, for example. Sturges (1978) suggests that the total extent of a core in that subject could be to:

- Recognise size of numbers to ten (e.g. number of people in a queue).
- Count to 100 (e.g. number of people in a room).
- Read and write numbers to 20 (e.g. read the number of a bus).
- Handle money in fairly complex ways. (This is the biggest task. An E.S.N. teacher I worked with had evidence that children who could not handle money were systematically 'robbed' by over-charging and short-changing).
- There are other things that are useful but not essential.
- Tell time (useful for TV times and reading timetables, but not essential, you can always ask).
- Simple measure (most important for practical skills like DIY in the home, but not essential).

That is all. It is not very much, but it is what every child of any ability should leave school confident that they can handle.

Obviously such a minimum is not what the CDC has in mind in their paper, for it is so very minimal that most pupils do not have to go to school to achieve it.

However, whilst it is technically relatively simple to formulate an optimum, essential minimum, for mathematics, subjects such as science and social studies hardly lend themselves to such reduction, as others such as Piper (1976) have demonstrated.

The real question the CDC should be addressing, therefore, is the point at which the currently diverse curricula diverge, and they should demonstrate first that divergence occurs at such a fundamental level that pupils are being disadvantaged before asking people to accept the necessity for a national core curriculum. I believe that one result of researching a null curriculum would be to show that there was, within the limits of the minima of a core, a general conformity, conformity in fact to the extent that legislation would not ensure significantly more conformity. Inevitably, legislation for a core would only override the few necessary local differences, and make change extremely slow.

I am attracted to the idea of researching the null curriculum because it would alter procedures and policies, and thus shift the direction of the present debate. The CDC approach is basically that of asking us to accept the idea of a core in principle, trusting the powers that be to research and formulate it in terms of content which would meet democratic approval. The opposite approach would be to specify the content of a core, asking us to then decide if we think it is necessary.

An examination of the null curriculum would first show what was not being taught, and this content could then be debated in terms of the extent to which it should be universally taught (and incidentally what parts of the present curriculum would hence become parts of a new null curriculum) before the question of whether a core curriculum was the right solution to the problem was discussed.

My forecast is that if the researching of the null curriculum were to reveal wide gaps in what it was subsequently agreed should be taught, then this fact alone would prove adequate to place sufficient pressure on non-conforming schools to ensure change. And it would do so with none of the obviously enormous bureaucratic system necessary to formulate, negotiate, implement and supervise a core curriculum.

Incidentally, the whole question of the administration of a national core is, of course, a glaring omission in the CDC document, and readers should try to imagine just what kind of structures with what kind of powers would be necessary to supervise it. For example, a national core would require national supervision, and that would entail further centralisation, no doubt to Canberra.

A second answer to the question of what other means would ensure that at a national level school pupils were taught the essential minima, is to concentrate upon the processes learned and the generalisations derived from the informational content of our current curriculum, which would thus remain free to be varied to suit local needs.

One approach to this kind of curriculum organisation has been outlined in a discussion paper called 'The Coordinated Curriculum' (Tripp 1978). Briefly, this approach employs first an analysis of existing curricula to discover the broad generalisations (all situations have both good and bad points, 'man and his environment are always related') and generalised skills (graphing, reporting) in order to coordinate their teaching through the different subjects and topics of the syllabuses of the school subjects across the different school years.

The importance of this approach is that it does allow for individual local variation of information learned within the time spent on core studies (as opposed to local variation of the core), and it also ensures that our pupils are being taught a curriculum which has the widest possible application, and hence is not only appropriate to more situations, but is also less likely to require change over a generation of pupils.

The twin answers to the question as to possible alternatives to a core curriculum as outlined by the CDC and objected to in this article, are to first question what evidence there is which shows that a national core curriculum is actually necessary; and then, if the case is demonstrably proven, to set about formulating it in terms of processes, and generalisations which have a wide sphere of applicability.

Conclusion

Are the possible misuses of a 'Core Curriculum for Australian Schools' suggested in this article too far-fetched? I think not. A close reading of the document shows that the reasons for the introduction of a core curriculum are essentially utilitarian, and will lead to a most rigid, compulsory and centralised education system throughout Australia. I do not blame the CDC for this. At present there is a powerful reactionary response to many of the changes and ideas of the last decade, and although the CDC document is indeed more liberal than some of the
more extreme of these forms of current thinking, in issuing the document the CDC is seen to be espousing the notion of some kind of a core curriculum, and hence, a degree of uniformity and compulsion in the school curriculum which I find totally unacceptable.

I will indeed be most surprised if lobby groups of all kinds do not use this discussion paper to support their positions. The Back to Basics Movement, for instance, can quote parts of this document to show that their movement is supported by the CDC. The testing movement will be able to make similar claims under the guise of evaluating the core. The more centralised State Departments of Education will be able to use it as a stick to beat out local innovations should they so wish. To accept any kind of core with the manifold dangers inherent in the very tenets of the notion is to jeopardise all the educational and democratic progress made over the past decade.

Although I would like to think that the purpose the CDC document set out to achieve was debate of the nature engaged in by this author, I cannot do so because, were that the case, the paper would not have been subtitled 'What it is and why it is needed'. Apart from describing what one kind of a core curriculum is, no mention is made of the many very obvious implications entailed by its very nature, so it clearly sets out to persuade the inexpert majority to accept it.

Dr Skilbeck stated in discussion that it was aimed at the general community and teachers in particular, and that was the reason why it was so superficial in, amongst other areas, other definitions of core. If it is aimed at a general readership, then why are no reservations, no problems, no adverse points of any substance described in order to inform the general public of other sides to the debate? What it does is to pretend to present the information about a core curriculum, whilst only presenting one-sided arguments for it.

In sum, the real danger of this document is that whilst it has the superficial appearance of liberality, it is in fact perpetrating a most repressive educational regime.

References


