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Making decisions in “a bit of a bubble”: Relevant Australian Curriculum content for students in the Middle East

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Keywords

Offshore schools; Australian curriculum; Relevance; Transnational schooling

Abstract

The introduction of the Australian national curriculum generated heated debate in Australia. Content that should or should not be required for all students across the country to learn was a contested topic, as was the adaptability of the curriculum to ensure its suitability in schools across the nation. Throughout the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum, researchers and journalists have reported on the challenges Australian based school leaders and teachers have experienced when trying to understand the relevance of some curriculum content in their particular context. However, very little attention is being paid to the experiences of staff implementing the curriculum in offshore Australian international schools, despite the fact that schools have been licenced to use Australian curricula and syllabi since the late 1980s.

This paper is based on exploratory research undertaken in an offshore Australian international school in the Middle East with a view to gaining insight into teachers' perceptions of the relevance of Australian Curriculum content for their students. The majority of students at the school are from the United Arab Emirates and the surrounding nations and the majority of teaching staff are not from the region. Many educators interviewed for the research identified students' ethnicities as a significant influence when teachers interpret Australian Curriculum content and making decisions about what to teach.

A key finding from this research is that curriculum decisions, including those made with reference to students' ethnic backgrounds, are made 'in-house' without input from members of the Emirati or broader communities. Teachers indicated that their knowledge of students' lives and backgrounds is not extensive and that there is scope to build on existing initiatives at the school to increase intercultural understanding and community consultation. Finally, the author calls on scholars to engage with curriculum work occurring in offshore Australian international schools.

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Introduction

Curriculum has an impact on national and personal identity (Atweh & Singh 2011; Green 2019; Kennedy 2019), and the protracted debates about the content of the Australian national curriculum highlight the weight that is placed on curriculum to do this identity work (Berg 2010; Donnelly 2011; Maxwell, Lowe & Salter 2018). Given this, it might seem incongruous that the Australian Curriculum developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) from 2011 to 2015 for Australian students in Australian schools is exported to offshore Australian international schools, some of which have a predominantly non-Australian student population. In this paper, factors which interviewed educators at an offshore international school in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) identified as influential when interpreting, implementing and adapting the Australian Curriculum will be discussed. The research involved interviews with teachers and heads of departments (most of whom were from Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, with a few from the United Kingdom, Canada, USA and South Africa). These educators demonstrated a commitment to considering students' backgrounds and futures when planning, teaching and assessing the Australian Curriculum. Some educators recognised that endeavouring to develop intercultural understanding while remaining isolated from the Emirati community was problematic. Consequently, this paper suggests that there is a need for critical engagement with the ways in which educators develop intercultural understanding and are attempt to respond to their school context, specifically the ethnicity and culture of the student cohort, when making decisions about 'what to teach' and 'how to teach'.

Kennedy (2019 p.118) insists that "any discussion of the school curriculum signals an engagement in a significant social and political arena related to a nation's concept of itself and what it expects future generations to know, value and do". This assertion is particularly pertinent when the curriculum under discussion was explicitly designed for Australian students attending Australian schools for the benefit of the Australian nation (ACARA 2011), but is also being implemented in offshore Australian international schools. In this paper, therefore, the focus on the curriculum decision making of school leaders and teachers is explored through interviews about how their understanding of the socio-political context that the school operates within and the "[host] nation's concept of itself and what it expects future generations to know, value and do" impacts on localisation or contextualisation of these processes.

There is very limited research into the operation of offshore Australian international schools despite the decades long history of curriculum licensing to offshore schools and the sector's recent emergence as an area of significant growth potential (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2015; Burgess 2016; New South Wales Education Standard Authority and Nous [NSWSA & Nous] 2019). Given the lack of research into offshore schooling broadly, and curriculum related decision making within these schools specifically, this paper is intended to raise awareness that these contexts are relevant to curriculum scholars, not only those interested in transnational education or the export of curricula, but also those involved in community consultation and intercultural work in Australia-based schools. Limited scholarly literature related to offshore schools also means

that there is a risk of trying to address too much in one paper; consequently, I have sought to balance an explanation of the historical and contemporary context that is required to understand the research project, the school setting and key insights from the research.

Research project and questions

Three factors led to the undertaking of this project. The first was an interview I conducted with a pre-service teacher as part of a previous project exploring the intentions underpinning the introduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curriculum priority in the, then, recently introduced Australian Curriculum:

I will situate myself not as a teacher but as a mother. As a mother I have children in schools. I wouldn't want my children to learn things [related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures] that will not really be helpful to them. When they become adults, and they become competitive, and go to the university, then become complete adults, I don't want them to be learning something that will isolate them from the rest of the world. I want something that is meaningful to the whole world. ('Alyssa', pre-service teacher in final month of her degree, interviewed 2013)

Given the public debates around the Australian Curriculum, I was deeply familiar with concerns similar to Alyssa's regarding potential negative impacts explicitly historical and cultural content might have on a subject like Mathematics. These concerns were placed into a global context when Alyssa shared her fear that localised context would lead to children being disadvantaged when competing against graduates from around the world. Another influence on the current project was the review of the Australian Curriculum in 2014, conducted four years after online publication of curricula for English, Mathematics and Science. The review's authors highlighted concerns of several stakeholders regarding the perceived relevance of curriculum content, some of which was believed to have been included because of political pressure, rather than its "educational value" (Australian Government 2014 *passim*). Finally, I learned of the existence of Australian offshore schools licensed to implement state and national curricula. The first offshore curriculum license/franchise opportunities were advertised overseas by the Western Australian Government in 1986 and Australian state curriculum authorities have licensed dozens of offshore schools to utilise their state's curriculum (Burgess 2016; NSWSA & Nous 2019). With the staged release of the Australian Curriculum commencing in December 2010 and implementation timelines determined by States and Territories, licence agreements between offshore schools and Australian state curriculum authorities have reflected the shift to a new national curriculum. Given that the teaching and learning of Australian Curriculum content was contentious and challenging for some stakeholders based in Australia, the nation the curriculum was designed in and for, I wondered how stakeholders in offshore schools were engaging with this content. As such, the project was designed to answer several questions, including:

- What do teachers and curriculum leaders at the school believe to be influential on their curriculum decisions regarding Australian content?

- What do teachers and curriculum leaders at the school talk about when discussing the relevance of Australian content in their school context?

I spoke with key staff in several educational authorities and state education departments about the project and a school in the UAE was recommended to me as a possible site for the research. After receiving permission from the principal to distribute an invitation to participate in the study, I sent a participant information letter, consent form and link to online survey to all staff (all documents were in Arabic and English). I visited the school in 2018 and interviewed 18 staff members including teachers from Prep to Year 12, Heads of Departments, and staff in other administrative positions. Surveys were completed by nine staff members – most of whom also agreed to an interview. In addition to interviews, some teachers and department heads also shared curriculum planning documents with me, and I visited classrooms to observe lessons and speak with teachers informally before and after the lessons. While topics raised by participants that are vital to this paper are discussed in detail, many topics, such as teaching approaches and strategies not directly connected with curriculum content, have not been discussed due to space restrictions.

Terminology

Curriculum

For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘curriculum’ refers to written formal resources produced by curriculum authorities that provide guidance around matters of the teaching and learning of school subjects (Marsh 2009). In particular, this paper focusses on the content descriptions in the Australian Curriculum which articulate content related to knowledge and skills that “is to be taught and learnt” (ACARA 2019b para. 1). In using ‘curriculum’ in this way, I am not ignoring phenomena that occur outside of the written curriculum, such as the hidden curriculum and learnt curriculum (Apple & King 1983; Jackson 1968; Ladson-Billings 2009; Marsh 2009) and particularly wish to recognise that curriculum is not one-dimensional but is a “complicated conversation” (Pinar 2011 *passim*). During development, interpretation and enactment, written curricula represent an endeavour to communicate key messages about teaching and learning. These complicated conversations can and should involve teachers engaging in self-reflexivity and learning from scholars, community members and colleagues, particularly those with dissimilar experiences and beliefs; and between students and their learning (Pinar 2011). While the term ‘curriculum’ in this paper refers to the formal, written documents produced by ACARA, the discussion surrounding these documents serves to highlight the necessity of engaging with the complicated nature of curriculum work.

Curriculum adaption

While teachers have substantial autonomy regarding how and what they teach, there are elements of the Australian Curriculum that are expected to be taught (ACARA 2019b). Interviewed teachers and heads occasionally mentioned removing and replacing such mandated content that appears in the Australian Curriculum. In these instances, where educators reported moving beyond curriculum enactment or implementation (Ball, McGuire

& Braun 2012; Marsh 2009) to add, remove or change mandated elements, the term ‘curriculum adaption’ is used. ‘Curriculum adaptation’ is often used to refer to alterations to a written curriculum to facilitate greater responsiveness to the strengths and needs of students with disabilities. However, the term also serves a useful purpose in this paper by highlighting deliberate changes made (or not made) to the curriculum as a consequence of educators’ decisions about what content from the Australian Curriculum is relevant (or not) to their, majority Emirati, student cohort. (Groves, Doig, Vale & Widjaja 2016).

Relevance

‘Relevance’ is a recurrent theme in education debates, policy and the Australian Curriculum (e.g. ACARA 2019c; Australian Government 2014; Maxwell 2014; Clark 2006; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008), but the meaning of the concept is often assumed and under-conceptualised (Bowman 1989; Sealey & Noyes 2010; Stuckey, Hofstein, Mamlok-Naaman, & Eilks 2013). My intention is not to present case here for or against the concept of relevance in curriculum work – there is insufficient space for such a discussion, but I will demonstrate how ‘relevance’ is problematic when curriculum decisions are based on *perceptions* about what is relevant to students rather than critical engagement with the concept, and active concerted endeavours to *learn* what is relevant to students.

Notions of relevance in education scholarship have often been linked to motivational theories of learning. Consequently, ‘relevant’ curriculum content is perceived by stakeholders to be that which is likely to engage and maintain student interest, contribute immediately meaningful skills or knowledge, and/or have future utility in at least one of a range of contexts (e.g. social, economic) (Bowman 1989; Hofstein, Kesner & Ben-Zvi 1999; Sealey & Noyes 2010; Stuckey et al 2013). Since these are widely considered to be ‘good’ educational outcomes, relevance seems a logical criterion against which the worthwhileness of curriculum content should be assessed. Such a position, however, conflates that which is ‘necessary’ with that which will motivate students to learn (Stuckey et al 2013). The assumption of an inherent relationship between motivation and relevance can also obscure the multiple, sometime disparate interests in classrooms which may motivate teachers to teach that which simultaneously demotivates students. In this study, notions of ethnicity and culture are closely connected to decisions about curriculum relevance and are similarly problematised.

Lingard and Haber’s (1999 p. S124) research illuminates ways in which relevance is mobilised in decision making processes: “The term ‘relevance’ means the logical framework in which [the professional]-communicator trims away excess information to create the concise discourse that is expected and valued in [the field]...”. While this definition developed from the discourses of physicians during case presentation, the time constrained outcomes-focussed environment that results in professionals making decisions about presenting ‘just the relevant data’ suggests their conceptualisation of relevance can be usefully applied to the field of education (Askill-Williams 2012). Lingard and Haber found that the principle of relevance may be constructed in curricula as if professionals have innate knowledge and skill to decide what will or will not be relevant in any given situation.

Consequently, there may be little to no information or instruction to guide professionals through a procedural method of making decisions specifically related to the concept of relevance. While there is not space for this paper to provide procedural instruction of this nature, it will serve to highlight the need for further research into the support required to better enable teachers to engage in intercultural curriculum decisional making.

Background of a national curriculum for a global future (but not offshore schools)

During the 1970s, international social, political and economic changes significantly influenced Australian education scholarship and policy. The decade saw a move away from centralised schooling and towards state school-based curriculum and assessment (Bartlett 1992; Green 2003; Musgrave 1970). Widespread concerns for the nation's economic wellbeing during the 1980s, however, prompted attempts to develop national curriculum systems in order to "maximise scant curriculum development resources and to minimise unnecessary differences in curriculums across the states" (Bartlett 1992 p. 221). While concerted efforts to nationalise the curriculum were continued by Federal Governments in the following decade, State Governments were reluctant to relinquish responsibility for, and control of, school education bestowed upon them by the Australian Constitution (Commonwealth of Australian Constitution Act 1900). During the late 1980s and 1990s, governments and international agencies (such as the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD]) framed curricula as vehicles to ensure national prosperity through investment in human capital (Bartlett, 1992). These views on, and approaches to, curriculum design permeated the new century (McAllan 2011).

Alongside these economic policy drivers, the Australian 'History Wars' of the 1990s and early 2000s shifted debates about historiography from the academy into the public arena. Historians, politicians, educators and political cartoonists debated what Australian students were, and should be, learning about their nation's history. Advocates for updated curricula argued that the true legacy of Australia had been largely omitted from school history curricula and that a curriculum relevant to a contemporary generation of learners needed to confront the, often painful, truths of Australia's past (Macintyre & Clark 2004; Sharp 2012). Critics countered that the content and standards of traditional education should be maintained in the face of appeals to increasing the relevance of curricula, which were characterised as excuses to 'dumb down' curricula and pander to outspoken minority groups by presenting an unnecessarily negative picture of Australia's history (Donnelly 2007). The development of the national curriculum began in earnest during this period (National Curriculum Board [NCB] 2008) and these discussions extended beyond History into all fields and curriculum areas (e.g. Baynes 2016; Maude 2013).

Seeking to provide a common curriculum framework, relevant to all schools and students across Australia, the designers of the Australian Curriculum attempted to create a replacement for the nation's disparate state curricula and promote consistent and quality content, assessment, and pedagogy (Kennedy 2019). With a national curriculum, proponents suggested, teachers in every school around the country would teach the same content at roughly the same time – not synchronously – but at least in the same year level. However, in order to maintain regional distinctiveness and relevance, state governments, teachers and

other stakeholders demanded a curriculum that was responsive to local contexts (NCB 2009). Consequently, the Australian Curriculum was designed to explicitly encourage teachers to develop teaching and learning experiences responsive to local contexts and there is mention of some curriculum content being included specifically to enhance the relevance of that curriculum to more students (ACARA 2016).

ACARA describes the Australian Curriculum as ‘three dimensional’ because of its three major, interrelated components: the eight Learning areas (e.g. English, Science), seven General capabilities (e.g. literacy, numeracy, intercultural understanding), and three Cross-curriculum priorities (CCPs) (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and Sustainability). The Learning Areas, aspects of which are the primary focus of this paper, consist of descriptive text that outlines a rationale, broad context and topics for each subject area and year level, plus content descriptions which, importantly for this research, “specify what young people will learn” (ACARA 2019b para. 3). Achievement standards associated with Learning Areas “describe the depth of understanding and the sophistication of knowledge and skill expected of students at the end of each year level or band of years in their schooling” (ACARA 2019b para. 3). The achievement standards guide assessment of conceptual understandings and skills for each year level or band of years but do not always explicitly align with all content descriptions. The seven General capabilities are another major component of the curriculum that are “addressed through the content of the learning areas ... Teachers are expected to teach and assess general capabilities to the extent that they are incorporated within learning area content” (ACARA 2019c para. 3-4). Cross-curriculum priorities “are only addressed through learning areas [e.g. English or Science] and do not constitute curriculum on their own ... They will have a strong but varying presence depending on their relevance to the learning area” (ACARA 2019a para 2). Content related to CCPs may be included in the content descriptions, and can also be added as teachers see fit – ACARA indicates where the CCPs might be particularly relevant to existing content descriptions via symbols for each CCP and examples of this content by way of ‘Elaborations’.

Finally, it is important to note that the Australian Curriculum was designed for, and continues to be explicitly targeted at *Australian* students:

The Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all young *Australians* should be taught, regardless of where they live *in Australia* or their background. ACARA draws on the best national talent and expertise, and consults widely to develop the Australian Curriculum and resources.

Education plays a critical role in shaping the lives of young *Australians* and contributing to a democratic, equitable and just society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse. (ACARA n.d.-a para. 1-2, emphasis added)

There is no suggestion that the curriculum was developed with offshore schools or students in mind, despite offshore licensing arrangements existing since 1986 and an estimated 74 offshore schools currently licensed to teach an Australian curriculum (Burgess 2016).

The background information provided in this section is important as it helps to explain the project's focus on questions of how nationhood, Australian identity and other 'Australian' topics are responded to in an offshore school where the students are, except a very small minority, not Australian, and whose graduates are not likely destined for Australian shores.

Introduction to the school

The UAE school (hereafter, the school) is privately owned by an institution whose owners have close ties to the country and region. In 2018 the school had approximately 1500 students enrolled in Early Childhood and Prep to Year 12 (P-12) classes. Most students are Emirati and/or students from other Arab majority countries (almost 60% and 90% respectively). The lingua franca of the school is English. The majority of students speak Arabic as their first language. The school uses one curriculum in the Early Childhood classes, and four curricula P-12: the Australian Curriculum (P-10), a selection of an Australian state's senior syllabi (Years 11 to 12), the UAE Ministry Arabic and Islamic studies curriculum (Early Childhood to Year 10), and International Baccalaureate Diploma (Years 11 to 12). The school offers sex-segregated classes in some subjects in the junior and middle school, and parents and carers can elect for their child/ren to attend either single-sex or coeducation classes. As required of all schools in the UAE, students have daily Arabic lessons (P-10), and at this school they mirror the Australian English curriculum in order for students to understand English curriculum concepts in both languages. Islamic studies classes occur twice a week (offered in Arabic and English). A Social Studies class taught by Ministry Curriculum staff focusses on national and regional topics, while a Home Studies class provides non-Emirati students with opportunities to study topics associated with their home countries.

The teaching staff at the time of research was approximately 100, with around 70 involved in the Australian and state senior curricula at the time of research (either exclusively or in conjunction with some International Baccalaureate subjects), more than 20 teachers are in the Arabic and Islamic studies department, and there were almost 10 Early Childhood teachers. At the time of research, the school had an Australian Principal and Deputy and, anecdotally, the majority of the teaching staff were from Australia followed by those from Aotearoa/New Zealand, and small numbers from South Africa, the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. The teachers working with the UAE Ministry Curriculum in the Arabic and Islamic studies department were (again, anecdotally) from countries other than the UAE, with most from countries in the Gulf region or North Africa. Most teachers live in accommodation near the school (although some live within the broader community), with the majority living in one compound and reporting close collegial relationships as a result. Those who teach in the Arabic and Islamic studies department do not live in this compound.

The school opened when the education system across the nation was under unprecedented scrutiny (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer & El Nemer 2007; Thorne 2011). Concerns about the quality of government-school education had been raised in the 1990s (e.g. Mograby 1999) and in 2005 those concerns were published in national newspapers which reported multiple deficiencies in the education system. These concerns were presented alongside acknowledgement of problems within the national education system from then minister of education, His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan (Salama 2005), and

academics highlighting the country's low expenditure on education compared to other countries identified in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report (Salama 2005; Salameh 2005). Reported concerns included outdated and irrelevant teaching resources and approaches, narrow curriculum offerings, and insufficiently articulated national curriculum and pedagogy goals (Salameh 2005; Thorne 2011). The response to these assertions was described by Thorne (2011 p. 173) as "a kind of 'policy hysteria'" built on a foundation of deficit discourse. Consequently, local solutions to the identified issues were not sought and multiple remedial initiatives were imported or adapted from other nations, including Australia (Ridge, Kippels & Farah 2017).

Since that time, demand for private education by international providers has been high in the UAE, despite government schools providing free education for Emirati nationals. The market share of school education provided by private schools has steadily increased from 30% in 2004 (Godwin 2006) to 73% in 2018 (Ministry of Education 2018). Godwin suggests parents choose private schools due to the continued poor reputation of public schooling in the UAE, while several scholars report a propensity amongst university students from Arab and non-Arab backgrounds to associate English (the language of instruction in private institutions and most universities) with modernity and economic prosperity, and Arabic (the language of public schools) with the past (Findlow 2006; Raddawi & Meslem 2015; Troudi 2009). Similar factors are identified in other countries which have seen an increase in local students attending international schools (Bray & Yamato 2003).

It was within this context that the founders of the UAE school instigated a global search for an education system that could support their vision for a unique school in the country. One founder sought to build a school that would deliver "really high standards of Arabic teaching, really strong Islamic values, [with] the best of Western pedagogy" (Teacher interview 2 2018) in order to enable children to grow into global citizens who are respectful of others while maintaining pride in their own national backgrounds. Connected to this was the school's potential to enable the preservation of the national culture, without repeating what the founders saw as a problem with the contemporary local and international (predominantly British and American) schools, too much focus on either Western or Arabic approaches.

Staff who participated in the research project generally demonstrated some awareness of this element of the founders' philosophy. Many spoke about the school as being not just Australian, and not just Emirati, but an example of a third cultural space that exists at the interface of the two national cultures. This belief was also reflected in the responses of interviewees to questions about curriculum decisions related to curriculum content, particularly that which might be considered 'Australian'. Teachers and department heads spoke of decisions being made with reference to what they believed would be relevant to their students who, as mentioned previously, are majority Emirati. The notion of 'third culture' and presence of 'third culture kids' are commonly praised characteristics of international and transnational schools, but scholars point to a propensity for the host culture to be undermined by that of the school's home culture (Emenike & Plowright 2017).

Adapting one nation's curriculum for another nation's children

Tailoring pedagogy and content in response to school context is common when implementing Australian curricula, and was frequently referred to by interviewed teachers and department heads. These interviewees stated that contextualisation through curriculum adaptation and selection of pedagogical approach was enthusiastically taken up, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Arts, Health and Physical Education and English. Local or familiar examples that illustrate curriculum content and concepts are sourced and developed by teachers in an effort to increase the relevance of content for students. This was far more likely to occur in the Humanities and Social Sciences and English, while teachers were more likely to struggle to recall such additions or changes being made to the Science and Maths curricula. Hence, implementation of the curriculum often involves decision making about the perceived relevance of curriculum content to students' lives based on teachers' conceptions of those students' cultures.

In this section, two broad responses to questions about curriculum decisions are examined – what teachers talked about with regard to the intersection of curriculum content and its perceived relevance to students' lives that may influence curriculum adaptation, and overt conversations about teachers' conceptions of those students' cultures.

Reasons curriculum content is likely to be adapted

Teachers communicated clear beliefs about what is relevant and not relevant for students based on ethnic, religious and national context, utility in an international context, and the fact that they are teaching in an Australian international school. Interviewed staff at the school spoke about several factors related to the notion of 'relevance' that are influential when making decisions about retaining, adding or trimming curriculum content:

- cultural norms of students
- ethnic, language, and religious backgrounds of students
- popular culture reference familiar to students
- geographic, political and historical significance of the location of school
- identification of the school as Australian
- international identity of the school
- recognition of school as third cultural space
- expected pathways for students after school
- topics, skills, and knowledge from other subjects

Post-school pathways were raised in surveys and interviews as a significant factor in decision making around Australian topics. The majority of students at the school are not expected to seek further education or employment opportunities in Australia after graduation. Remaining in the UAE was predicted for many students, with North American or Western European destinations reported as the most likely foreign destinations students would live temporarily, before returning to the UAE. This differs to expected pathways for students in other offshore Australian schools in a country such as China (Burgess 2016). The most frequently stated reason for adapting curriculum content was that it enabled teachers to connect content with students' lives. A common reason for omitting or reducing the focus on specific curriculum content was a perceived lack of local relevance, which could lead to extensive time spent

explaining unimportant aspects of that Australian content or risking disengagement and reduced motivation to learn.

‘Australian’ content within the curriculum was identified by interviewees and survey respondents as related to specific peoples (particularly Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples), historical events, natural environmental processes (e.g. rain), fauna, and texts by authors geographically located within Australia’s boundaries. When asked whether such content is relevant in their teaching areas, interviewed staff suggested there are some subjects in which Australian content is more relevant than others: (in descending order of relevance) Humanities, English, Science, Health and Physical Education, and Mathematics. Skills were spoken about very differently to curriculum content in the knowledge and understanding strand and were, without exception, described as universal and relevant to all students, from any background, heading along any future education or employment pathway. When reference was made to the cross-curriculum priorities, Sustainability was the only one deemed relevant in a UAE context by most survey respondents, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia considered not relevant.

When asked why they might adapt the curriculum, teachers said that relevant content was that which is more engaging for students and enables a shift from “surface level to that deeper level of understanding” (Teacher interview 2 2018), for example, shifting focus from who a particular historical figure was when the focus is on textual features of a newspaper article. One teacher reported that while they could not produce empirical evidence, their teaching team had increased the ‘relevance’ of content and believed, as a result, “that the students’ focus and their effort and determination to complete those tasks had improved” (Teacher interview 3 2018). Interviewed staff demonstrated a keen interest in, and commitment to, using the Australian Curriculum in culturally responsive ways. Teachers spoke of interpreting and adapting curriculum and pedagogy in a manner that combines third-culture and multicultural approaches, resulting in the maintenance of features of Australian cultures in association with characteristics of other cultures.

Given the emphasis placed on students’ ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and religion, it is useful to examine the ways in which these characteristics were explained to the researcher.

Survey respondents indicated that the most important characteristics that help to understand their school include the high number of local (56%) and Arab students (90%) in the school, the Arabic language background of most students, and the distinctiveness of an Australian school in the UAE. Interviewed staff, most of whom completed the survey, identified characteristics of students or their families that the teachers attributed to ‘culture’ as key to understanding the school. Some of these perceived cultural attributes were spoken of favourably both as inherently good qualities, but also as factors that positively contributed to making the job of teachers easier (e.g. loving, child-friendly parenting, and the respect for teachers believed to result from tenets of Islam). A number of ascribed cultural attributes were discussed in terms of how they were believed to reduce motivation and undermine a productive work ethic. These included a perceived tendency of parents and nannies to indulge

children and demand little of them; Emiratisation (official government policy resulting in positive discrimination toward Emirati nationals which ensures employment, housing, healthcare and education); and a parental belief that education is the sole domain of the school while home is for relaxation and family interaction (not study or homework).

The language backgrounds of students (predominantly Arabic speakers, with English as an additional language) and broader UAE community, while acknowledged as rich and novel, were not identified as an academic strength by the majority of interviewed staff but as a potential impediment to academic achievement, although one that was generally overcome after students attend the school for several years.

Emirati and/or Bedouin students and people/s were frequently likened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and people/s during interviews, “we substitute [curriculum content]. So, it would be the Emiratis and they are our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders so that's who we look at” (Teacher interview 4 2018). This connection was only explicitly discussed with reference to notions of first peoplehood while the significant socio-political and economic differences between Emirati nationals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was not raised. Similarly, there was no suggestion that colonial or contemporary experiences that are often associated with indigenous peoples in Australia and former European colonies were associated with Emirati and/or Bedouin people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures were generally deemed irrelevant and replaced by Emirati cultural and historical content.

The curriculum content deemed irrelevant and adapted to enhance relevance

Stuckey et al (2013) report a tendency for teachers and education researchers to conflate the concept of ‘relevance’ with those of meaningfulness, interest and motivation and this was in evidence during interviews. The reason to increase relevance was to motivate students to engage with the taught content, and connecting content with students’ lives was the means by which this was expected to be achieved. Stuckey et al (2013) problematise the conflation of motivation, relevance and other concepts, stating that something can be necessary without being of interest to, or motivating for, students, and vice versa.

In addition to a conflation of motivation, interest and relevance, interview responses suggested an influential intersection – the conflation of teachers’ *perceptions* and *beliefs* about students’ lives and cultures with the *lived experiences* of those students. It is in this space that teachers talked about making decisions about what they consider interesting or necessary for students. The interview responses described below indicate that interviewed teachers and department heads make curriculum decisions intended to increase relevance, based on their own understanding of students’ cultures. While this intersection between culture and relevance is also apparent in Australia-based schools (Salter & Maxwell 2016), it was particularly apparent to the educators in this offshore school who identified difference between students’ cultures that of the school.

Interviewees in some learning areas spoke of adapting curriculum content they interpreted as ‘Australian’ more extensively than in others, but there were some elements of the curriculum

that were viewed similarly regardless of learning area. The most extensive adaptations described in interviews were in the Humanities and Social Sciences:

So, take grade 6 History from the Australian Curriculum and the focus is on Federation. If we dish up Australian Federation to 56% kids [from this country], 80% Arab kids, and a smattering of everything else, there's no connection. So, we replace Australia with [this country] and we unpack key events and key figures in that. So, wherever we can it is a huge priority to go 'Okay, that's the knowledge, that's the elaboration of that within that content descriptor. How can we make that really strong, cultural links in the contexts that these kids are going to be engaged in?'. And that's every unit where it comes up Australian, you go 'Right, do we use Australia as a comparison or an initial case study? But how can we make it for this part of the world as well?'. (Teacher interview 2 2018)

As indicated by this teacher, the content descriptions (the content ACARA identifies as that which is expected to be taught and learnt) and elaborations (examples of activities provided by ACARA to help teachers to address content description) are analysed by the HASS team with a view to identifying core curriculum concepts and themes. Subsequently, content deemed contextually irrelevant is adapted in an attempt to connect with students.

... if we keep dishing up this knowledge and understanding content descriptor that is purely about Australia, how are the kids relating that to their own lives? And that's the intention of the Australian Curriculum. Knowledge is always to make those connections with your own lives. So, we look at the elaborations and it might be the examples given and it's replacing that with identities from this part of the world. So, it's still that same process of knowledge...so there's the big content descriptor, the elaborations, is the same - it's individuals, it's groups, it's honing in on those key words but our examples are different. (Teacher interview 2 2018)

Here, the interviewed teacher explains that the concepts and skills described in the content description are carefully considered and addressed in teaching and assessment, with the only change being to the content and context. This kind of response was common and reflects principles of some approaches to responsive pedagogies that engage students through familiar content (Alghamdi 2018). It also aligns with principles scholars have identified as foundational to the three-dimensional Australian Curriculum – emphasising conceptual learning and the development of transversal competencies (Green 2018).

However, the year level description for year 6 HASS has a clear content focus on “Australia in the past and present and its connections with a diverse world” (ACARA n.d.-b para.1). It is not my intention to argue for or against the adaptation of content such as that described in relation to the year 6 HASS History sub-strand content outlined above. However, the fact that such changes were reported as necessary to engage students in at least some of the dozens of offshore Australian international schools strikes me as an important topic for consideration. Given interviewed teachers’ and ACARA’s stated desire for relevant curriculum (ACARA 2016), and the interplay of decisions about the relevance of the curriculum and teacher perceptions of students’ cultures and ethnicity, consideration must be given to how offshore

(and Australia-based) educators can be supported to engage with the complexities of this work.

While content related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was discussed by a small number of teachers, it was much more likely to be ‘mentioned’ in class rather than studied in detail throughout a term. More often, teachers talked about excluding such content and replacing it with content related to Emirati people, cultures and histories:

One of the really obvious things we've changed is, one of the things it always refers in the curriculum documents to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island [sic], so whenever it says that, we kind of take that as ‘Okay, let's think Emirati here’. Instead of what it suggests for Aboriginals [sic] we would do for Emiratis in that particular situation, and actually change part of the planning so it reflects part of Emirati culture rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait because it just doesn't make sense to do that. (Teacher interview 14 2018)

Bedouin and/or Emirati histories and cultures are important in a UAE based school, as are Indigenous Studies the world over. However, the suggestion that “it just doesn’t make sense to do that” suggests that the teacher believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are *only* relevant in Australia, or that such content could not be beneficial to the education of Emirati students. This assumption is not restricted to this school; it is reflective of attitudes of some stakeholders in Australia who maintain that Indigenous content is relevant only to Indigenous students, and to non-Indigenous students where there is significant overlap in the histories and cultures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Australian Government 2014). It is also reflective of broader themes present in contemporary schooling, including reified, essentialised conceptions of ‘culture’ and ‘Indigeneity’ (Jayasuria 2008; Nakata, Nakata, Keech & Bolt 2012; Pinar 2011; Walton et al 2015). This view of the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content can result in missed opportunities to engage with local content and knowledges. Again, I am limited to raising this as a topic for consideration, with a particular view to curriculum support in offshore school, rather than engaging in an in-depth analysis of the merits of comparative Indigenous Studies or the inherent worth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content.

Several teachers stated that most Australian Curriculum content for Maths and Science related to knowledge and skill is universally applicable, regardless of national context or student background. Rather than adapting the core content in a substantial way, teachers and heads in these subject areas referred to the provision of local examples being provided to students in addition to those required by content descriptions e.g. dirhams and fils as well as dollars and cents are referred to when teaching about currency (Australian currency is a topic of testing in NAPLAN which was the reason offered for teaching a topic otherwise considered irrelevant). Two topics reported as being omitted completely from the Science curriculum were anything related to human sexual reproduction, and seasons. The former was reported by one Head as not allowed by the Ministry of Education, but local news suggests that sex education is not mandatory, but is not banned (Al Amir 2017). Two interviewed teachers (one in Prep and one in the primary school) suggested that there are no seasons in

the UAE (just ‘hot and not so hot’) so it was impossible to teach that component of the Australian Curriculum. This assertion is also not supported by literature which explains that seasons in the region have had historical and contemporary impacts on weather, trade, sport, customs, and industry (Hawker 2007; Heard-Bey 2001). With regard to this last example, the notion raised earlier, that content related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures was ‘obviously’ not relevant in the Emirates, struck me as significant. If teachers and students engaged with the content in the Australian Humanities and Social Sciences curriculum related to the range of seasons recognised by Indigenous peoples (Nakata 2011; Prober, O'Connor, & Walsh 2011), students might be prompted to inquire in the ways in which seasons have been understood in their own regions, potentially extending beyond the four interviewed teachers were aware of. These interview responses suggest assumptions are made about Emirati history and cultures, as well as the relevance or irrelevance of ‘Australian topics, that then impact on the inclusion and exclusion of curriculum content.

While opportunities to learn about Emirati cultures, histories and peoples from Emirati people themselves were not unheard of, interviewees identified limited engagement with people with expertise regarding the national, political, linguistic, geographical, and cultural context in which the school operates. Teachers reported few formal community engagement or consultation opportunities, particularly with regard to content expertise that likely exists outside the school and could inform curriculum decisions based on more accurate knowledge. The extent to which curriculum decisions are made without consultation with people from the host nation was raised by some participants as a concern, while other interviewed staff framed their understanding of students’ cultures and contemporary and historical life as sufficient and unproblematic.

Sources of information about students’ lives

The knowledge base on which teachers identified a need to adapt the curriculum or pedagogy was not reported as resulting from systematic education around relevant issues, nor formal consultation with stakeholders. Instead, information about students, their lives, their cultures, histories and futures, was predominantly sourced from other expatriate staff in staffroom conversations and intercultural professional development, and from students.

Information from intercultural awareness training

The intercultural competency professional development offered within the school was frequently referred to as an important and particularly useful source of information about generic characteristics of cultural groups from Gulf countries, and those from Western countries. This optional professional development opportunity was identified as the only formal activity designed to enhance staff knowledge and awareness of culture and its impacts on teaching and learning. The stated intention of school-based facilitators and supporters of the program is to develop culturally aware and responsive teachers by promoting practitioners’ self-reflection on their cultural identify, values, and beliefs; those of their students (based on broad cultural groupings), and the impact these factors have on teaching and learning. A consulting company offers the ‘inter-cultural intelligence’ (ICI) training package, of which Muller’s ‘three colors worldview’ model forms a significant part (Blankenburgh 2013). Muller developed the three colors worldview from his experiences as a

Christian missionary in the Middle East, and the model represents “an attempt at understanding worldview from a Biblical perspective” in order to enhance missionaries’ understanding of “how the Gospel is applicable to other cultures and enhance their cross-cultural communication” (James & McLeod 2014; Muller 2000 chap.1, 2). The evangelical roots of this ICI tool are not mentioned by the consulting company resources, instead, Muller is said to have initiated “anthropological and sociological research among the Bedouin” upon which the ICI training was developed (Blankenburgh 2013,p. 18).

While the evidence base on which the training package has been developed is unclear, small-scale research by James and McLeod (2014) concluded that the three colours tool is partially reliable in its identification of archetypes that participants of different ethnicities responded to more often than others. However, the researchers also noted that significant changes in the UAE have resulted in cultural shifts that have not been captured by the three colors model. Consequently, the three colors survey tool was considered useful in identifying differences between cultural groups, but those findings also suggest that the extent of differences and similarities should not be assumed based on ethnicity.

Information from colleagues

Information about students’ cultures and possible impacts they might have on delivery of curriculum and pedagogy is, according to interviewed staff, primarily sourced from teaching colleagues (particularly those in the same year level and/or subject area). Interviewed staff mentioned classroom sharing and collegial relationships between teachers who teach the Ministry Curriculum (who are Arabic speakers, primarily from the Gulf region and north Africa, but not Emirati) and those who teach the Australian, state senior or IB curricula (primarily English speakers from the global north). However, none recalled instances of knowledge exchange that influenced decision making related to implementation or selection of curriculum content beyond curriculum mirroring, whereby teachers of Arabic language classes mirror the curriculum of the Australian English curriculum.

Information from students but not from the broader community

Teachers discussed learning about Emirati cultural norms from colleagues, and religious norms from those same colleagues as well as from conversations with students. Examples of students teaching staff about religion included when a child would identify a problem with a game used in a Prep lesson by saying an element was *haram*, or forbidden in Islam (Teacher interview 1 2018; Teacher interview 12 2018).

Interviewed teachers suggested that, aside from occasional invitations to attend weddings or join a students’ family for dinner, staff have limited interactions with adults from the local community or elsewhere in the country.

I've heard it said that we live in a bit of a bubble here and it's pretty much true, I think. We walk from home to school every day, and we go out on weekends - we go shopping, we go to the malls I suppose, we go into the countryside and things like that. But actually, engaging with a different culture, yeah...it's easy to lose track of the fact that we're so far away from Australia. (Teacher interview 8 2018)

Such isolation from the host nation and local community is not unique to this international school (Hourani, Stringer & Barker 2012; Heyward 2014) and was a theme discussed by several interviewed staff. Attempts to develop intercultural understanding without interacting with diverse members of that community in multiple contexts are likely to be severely limited (Bash 2012; Walton, Paradies, Priest, Wertheim & Freeman 2015). Researchers investigating parental involvement in international schools in the UAE recognise the complexities of consultation and collaboration between home and school, particularly when there are cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious differences to navigate (Hourani, Stringer & Barker 2012). However, they also highlight parental interest in being involved in this work, and the benefits for the school community and student learning when school-parent collaboration is supported.

Opportunities for greater engagement with parents were identified as desirable by several interviewed staff, with a smaller number of teachers explicitly indicating that connections with local experts could increase teacher knowledge of local and national teaching and learning resources.

Also, in New Zealand, and I suppose that goes on to this adaptation thing, every assessment that we had, everything we spoke about, we talked about the local iwi or we related it to our local river, so in Science we did a lot of ecology, we'd go down to [the] beach, we'd look at the [local] River, we'd go over to [the] Bay, we'd visit our local marae [Māori meeting place] and get people to come in and talk to our kids. We did a lot to make them have a real sense of belonging. So, we really related the curriculum to the kids in front of us. Now the problem here is the UAE itself doesn't have much history. There's not a real association with land or buildings. There is a big association with their families and tradition, but we don't tap into that. And we don't tap into it for a number of reasons and I think one of them is, one, because we can't make it authentic and, two, because we're Western teachers who really don't understand and, for fear of not getting it right, we're not doing it. Whereas in New Zealand, if we got it wrong, there'd be 20 kids to correct you and it wouldn't matter and you'd just carry on. So, I'm just wondering there whether we're just not making those connections. (Teacher interview 6 2018)

As this teacher suggested, opportunities for broader community engagement are not being initiated, despite some staff having experience in this kind of work in their home country. There is recognition here that school staff stand to learn more about their current context and to interrogate their knowledge and beliefs, some of which appear to stem from comparisons with home e.g. a lack of history and connection to land in the UAE. Doing so could enhance their knowledge of Emirati cultures, histories, and other topics expected in the curriculum but that are currently omitted due, in part, to limited sources of information from which knowledge of the host country is gained. Several teachers raised limited formal consultation processes as potentially problematic, and suggested that increased engagement and consultation with members of the broader school community would be beneficial to interpretation of the Australian Curriculum, its implementation and adaption. Increased

involvement of parents and members of broader school communities is increasingly encouraged in scholarship and policy as a means to improve relationships between schools and stakeholders, and to enhance teaching and student learning (Hourani, Stringer & Barker 2012; Lowe, Harrison, Tennent, Guenther, Vass & Moodie 2019; Moussa-Inaty & De La Vega 2013; Queensland Government 2018).

Conclusion

This research project focused on ways in which curriculum content is interpreted then adapted, omitted or retained according to teachers' perceptions of the relevance of that content to students in an offshore school. Key findings from this research include the significant influence of educators' perceptions about students' ethnicity on curriculum decisions in several disciplines, and the knowledge sources expat educators reported drawing upon for information about students' lives and cultures that influence these decisions. The teachers interviewed spoke of seeking to provide an education that is in keeping with the intentions of the Australian Curriculum, while also looking for opportunities to enhance the relevance of curriculum content to better suit the perceived contextual needs of their, predominantly Emirati, students. This commitment was undergirded by a school culture that promotes the notion of a third cultural space in which neither the Australian origins of the school nor the location of the school in the UAE is considered more important than the other, but a combination of both drives decisions, including those related to decisions about curriculum content.

Despite these good intentions and supportive school culture, curriculum adaption intended to respond to students' contextual needs was reported as being undertaken in isolation from the broader UAE community. Contrary to policy and scholarly literature about intercultural understanding, parental involvement, consultative and collaborative practice, educators in this school stated that curriculum decision making is instigated and undertaken entirely 'in-house', with staff drawing on their collective knowledge of the country and culture sourced from other colleagues, their students, and limited informal interactions with parents and families of students. Isolated curriculum work of this nature is limited in its capacity to result in a rigorous, culturally responsive curriculum. While this research project did not involve evaluation of methods likely to enhance intercultural understanding in offshore schools or the appropriateness of consultation during intercultural curriculum work, scholarly literature and the responses of several interviewed educators suggest this is a topic that warrants further investigation.

There is need for further research into the transnational schooling sector, an entirely under-researched area of curriculum studies in Australia and many other countries. This paper has only scratched the surface by focusing on the relationship between curriculum decision making and staff knowledge of their local contexts and students' backgrounds, and by suggesting that community consultation and parental involvement in curriculum work warrants further investigation. Additional research could explore implications of the lack of recognition of offshore school contexts in ACARA curriculum documents and state syllabi, the adequacy of online advice for offshore Australian international schools on implementing

the Australian Curriculum, and investigation into the influences offshore school licencing can or should have on curriculum development and scholarship in Australia.

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