In this part of the book, the broad social and political contexts that influence the curriculum are discussed in relation to three specific issues:

1. Groups and individuals who see themselves with a stake in determining the content of the school curriculum

2. The development and implementation of the Australian curriculum, and the politics and issues surrounding its creation

3. Equity issues and the curriculum.
CHAPTER ONE

The School Curriculum and its Stakeholders: Who Owns the Curriculum?

Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- identify the various meanings attached to the ‘school curriculum’ and the different approaches made to it
- formulate a personal definition for the term ‘curriculum’
- understand the concept of ‘stakeholder’ as it applies to the school curriculum
- appreciate the roles of different stakeholders.

The school curriculum comes in many different forms. It may start off as a document prepared by an education system or the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Agency (ACARA) outlining what students should learn in a particular school subject throughout the years of schooling. Within a school, this document is likely to be translated into programs of study for different classes. Eventually, teachers will plan their teaching based on such a program and this will become the curriculum experienced by students. It is tempting to regard these different curriculum processes as the preserve of educators alone, since it is they who are largely responsible for producing the curriculum at different levels. Yet the production of the curriculum can also be seen as a social, political and economic activity that reflects much broader concerns than narrow educational objectives. In seeking to understand the school curriculum, therefore, we are also seeking to understand the complex forces and patterns that characterise the operation of society. The curriculum does not stand apart from the society in which it is created—it is firmly embedded in it.

Our explorations in this book will focus on the multiple dimensions of the school curriculum. This first chapter attempts to clarify the meaning of the term ‘curriculum’ and identify stakeholders who have an interest in its content and function.
The school curriculum: a search for meaning

The first point to note about the term ‘school curriculum’ is that different meanings are attached to it. It is not unusual for curriculum workers to be concerned at the lack of consensus about the field to which they devote so much of their energy. The following is a typical comment:

It is a field that remains contentious in terms of definition and delineation. After perusing all the curriculum texts on our collective shelves, we rediscovered what we and others have known for some time: ‘A quick survey of a dozen curriculum books would be likely to reveal a dozen different images or characterizations of curriculum. It might even reveal more, because the same author may use the term in different ways.’ (Schubert 1986, p. 26; Gehrke, Knapp & Sirotnik 1992, p. 51)

Table 1.1 (below) sets out some views of the curriculum taken by academic writers. This ambivalence among academics is not reflected in the views of most governments. Governments in many parts of the world have taken an unprecedented interest in what they see as the school curriculum (Lee 2001; Curriculum Development Council 2001; Komatsu 2002). This interest is predicated on the value that governments so often see in the school curriculum as an instrument of social and economic development, as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians:

In the 21st century Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young people

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1.1</th>
<th>CONFLICTING VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM</th>
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<tr>
<td>‘... an interrelated set of plans and experiences that a student undertakes under the guidance of the school.’ Marsh &amp; Willis (1995, p. 10)</td>
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<td>‘Some claim that a curriculum is the content or objectives for which schools hold students accountable. Others claim that a curriculum is the set of instructional strategies teachers plan to use.’ Posner (1995, p. 5)</td>
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<td>‘A curriculum is an organised set of formal educational and/or training intentions.’ Pratt (1980, p. 4)</td>
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<td>‘The curriculum is always, in every society, a reflection of what the people think, feel, believe, and do.’ Smith, Stanley &amp; Shores (1950, p. 3)</td>
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<td>‘Curriculum encompasses all learning opportunities provided by the school.’ Saylor &amp; Alexander (1966, p. 5)</td>
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<td>‘... (curriculum) is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation . . . (it) is intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological and international. Curriculum becomes the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world.’ Pinar et al. (1995, pp. 847-8)</td>
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with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence.

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008, p. 4)

The enthusiasm of governments for the school curriculum is matched by that of the business community. Business people see the curriculum as the means by which students gain the requisite knowledge and skills to make them productive workers. This point was highlighted by the Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia’s response to a Victorian teaching initiative regarding the ways in which excellent teaching might be rewarded:

Australia’s business leaders regard the need for Australia to have a world-class school education system as vital for our future growth and prosperity. ‘Businesses value people who have up-to-date knowledge and skills, and who continue to learn throughout their careers’, Ms Lahey said. Ms Lahey said that school education needs to provide the foundation for developing the capabilities that young people will require for performing well when they enter their future places of work. (Business Council of Australia, 2009)

The business community is in no doubt that the curriculum is important and that it must be structured in a particular way. Importantly, the school curriculum must deliver outcomes that are relevant to employment opportunities and the economic needs of society.

Parents also take a great interest in the curriculum, since it is the means by which their children can have a successful future. Their children routinely leave home every day for school and return in the afternoon. Parents usually take it on trust that children and young people know more and can do more when they return home than when they left in the morning. This trust is based on the school curriculum—the experiences and activities that children have been involved in during the day. For many parents, their views of the school curriculum have been shaped by their own experiences as students, as well as by the aspirations they have for their children. Parents wish to see their children grow and develop in personally rewarding ways. Yet parents are also very much attuned to the future: in which direction are their children heading for the years after school? Is the curriculum equipping them adequately? And will they be able to achieve the kinds of things they see as important? These questions are rarely conceived logically, rationally or analytically; rather, they come from the heart and a deep concern for loved ones. Parents are a constant reminder that the curriculum is inextricably linked with values, feelings, affection and love—it is not merely an abstraction for academic inquiry or government manipulation.
And then there are the students: the group for whom the curriculum is designed, the group for whom teachers are trained, the group for whom both society at large and parents in particular have such great aspirations. How do students conceive of the school curriculum? This is a difficult question to answer but some disturbing indications emerged in a National Education Longitudinal Study conducted in the United States. The survey sample included 25,000 eighth graders, their teachers, parents and principals. The results were not particularly inspiring:

- Teachers said that about one in five eighth graders were inattentive in class.
- More than one in five students usually or often came to class without pencil or paper. A similar proportion came to class without having finished their homework.
- Nearly half (47%) of the students said they were bored for at least half the time they spent in school.
- More than 10% of the students were frequently absent. A similar proportion was frequently disruptive.
- About one-third of the students had been sent to the office for misbehaving.
- At least one-third of the students reported that tardiness, absenteeism and cutting class were moderate to serious problems. (Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1990)

Clearly, these results are highly culture-specific and the timeframe may mean there have been changes to these data. Thus it would not be wise to see them as applying universally. Yet they provide a picture of young people who are disengaged from learning, for whom the curriculum of schools is meaningless and irrelevant. If there is even the slightest possibility that students in other countries feel similarly to their United States counterparts—or even if the percentage who feel that way is not as great—it still sends a strong signal to those who construct and design the curriculum. The clients or the end-users (to use two very ‘in vogue’ terms) may not feel the same way about the curriculum as many adults do, whether those adults are academics, business people, politicians or parents. Young people have a view of themselves and their world; they have aspirations and dreams, and it may be that the way we currently put together the curriculum is not always able to meet these concerns.

What conclusions can be made from all this? Is the search for meaning in the curriculum simply a conundrum in which there are conflicting and competing positions incapable of being resolved? This may be a convenient academic description, but it is not good enough for our young people or for society. Educators must make a greater effort to reconcile apparently conflicting views, for more is at stake than simply the resolution of an academic issue. In seeking to understand better the role of the curriculum in the 21st century, the purpose should be to ensure that children and young people are well equipped to handle whatever it is that this century will call them to do and to be. The
The curriculum of schools is essentially about the future; it cannot be based on curriculum models that have been handed down from previous centuries. It seems important to ensure that the curriculum of schools is able to help students to construct a future that is both personally and socially rewarding.

This involves rethinking the purpose and function of the curriculum away from the notion of conflicting and competing interests—those of parents, students, governments and the business community—towards the idea that there may be a core of common interests that binds people together. This is not to minimise the importance of difference. People are different in many ways. Democratic societies celebrate those differences. Yet for a society to function there must be common interests and common bonds that bring the people together. This is a key idea for understanding the curriculum. The interests of different stakeholder groups in the school curriculum is explored further in the following section, as is the idea of common interests across different groups.

**Stakeholders in the curriculum**

There is, first, the interests of individuals: students, parents and teachers. These individual interests may or may not be mutually exclusive.

Students usually attend school under compulsion until at least age 15, but until 17 in some states. Even though attendance is compulsory, students still have personal, social and vocational aspirations. What is more, students are part of changing and evolving cultures that are often at odds with those of the adults with whom they have to interact. The school curriculum must be able to meet students’ aspirations and take into account the changing cultural standards from the perspectives of the students themselves. Otherwise, the results that came out of the National Education Longitudinal Study in the United States—disengaged and disruptive students who see little value in what school has to offer—will continue to characterise the education system.

Parents also have aspirations that need to be recognised. These may be vocational in nature, but they may also be personal and social. Above all, parents want to see their children do well and they invest their faith in the school and its curriculum to ensure that this happens.

Teachers come at this from a different angle—they are the professionals. Their training equips them with knowledge and skills that in all likelihood dispose them towards the academic rather than the vocational, the theoretical rather than the practical and the esoteric rather than the relevant. In one sense, teachers simply implement the curriculum guidelines that govern the school. Yet more importantly, they interpret those guidelines and add a pedagogical dimension that creates day-to-day curriculum experiences for students. Teachers, in reality, are the mediators of the curriculum.

Not only are there concerns and interests coming from individuals within the school, but groups of individuals also have special interests that the school curriculum must
address. In Australia, for example, it is now recognised that the curriculum must in
particular address the special needs of girls, Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders,
people with disabilities, people from a non-English-speaking background, young people
who live in poverty and the geographically isolated. Each of these groups has special
interests that cannot be met by assuming that everyone is the same. The curriculum must
cater for difference and show how such difference is valued.

It is not enough to recognise that there are individual and group interests and concerns
within the school. To these must be added the interests of groups that are external to the
school. Governments have interests that are largely although not exclusively economic in
nature. Charting economic growth and development has become a major preoccupation
with governments and hence their concern. The nature of the school curriculum will
determine the knowledge and skills that future citizens will possess and hence their capacity
to contribute to the nation’s economy in a productive way. Of course, governments are
interested in more than economics. In general, democratic governments wish to see a
community that is socially cohesive, politically literate, culturally sophisticated, tolerant
and just. The school curriculum can do much to contribute to these objectives as well.

The business community shares much of the governments’ economic interests. For
businesses to be productive and prosperous, they need workers who are literate, numerate
and skilled in a variety of other ways. While businesses are capable of providing a good
deal of training themselves, they also have to rely on schools supplying young people
with the range of talent and skills they require.

Universities and other agencies of further education and training have an interest
in the shape and form of the school curriculum. In Australia, universities have exerted
an enormous influence on the curriculum, especially in the later years of schooling.
In an age of mass secondary education, however, the role of universities in this regard
is being increasingly questioned. Nevertheless, as the next step in the education process
for a rising number (although by no means the majority) of young people, universities
will retain their interest in the education of young people. They will always want to play
a ‘watchdog’ role to ensure that potential students come equipped with the requisite
knowledge to undertake further studies.

There are also other community groups that have a stake in what happens to young
people at school. Social service agencies, in particular, have to deal with the social, medical
and welfare issues related to young people and their families. These issues cannot be
divorced from what happens to students in schools. Sometimes, when school authorities
are trying to diagnose an educational problem, it seems they neglect to look beyond the
school to the student’s life outside. Schools often try to solve problems for which they
do not have the skills or expertise, particularly in the areas of mental health and family
problems. Student misbehaviour can often be traced to family or peer group issues rather
than to an educational cause. Students have lives outside the classroom and the external
environment is a powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour. Teachers and school
authorities are not always the best people to provide advice and assistance in this broader context.

In an important sense, academic conceptions of the curriculum both help and hinder us at this point. They help in the sense that they provide labels for the different conceptions that are articulated in the broader society, but they hinder because these labels tend to compartmentalise. Thus, when different orientations to the curriculum are labelled as ‘academic’, ‘instrumental’, ‘self-actualisation’, ‘social reconstructionist’ or ‘critical’, barriers are constructed that suggest these orientations are self-contained. Rather than creating barriers, it would be better to create new categories of thinking about the curriculum—categories that include the needs of all the individuals and groups that have been referred to so far. This model for the curriculum is shown in Table 1.2.

The main point to note about this proposed model is that the orientations and functions of the curriculum are not seen as mutually exclusive but as complementary. In constructing the school curriculum all interests need to be taken into consideration, with the aim of meeting the needs of all individuals and groups.

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<th>Table 1.2 orientations and functions of the school curriculum</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum orientations</strong></td>
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<td>Cultural</td>
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<td>Social</td>
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<td>Economic</td>
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A case

The complexity associated with the public interest in the curriculum was shown in Western Australia in 2006 when some parents organised a demonstration against the use of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in senior secondary education.

Parents, teachers and students held an anti-OBE rally on 14 June 2006 outside Parliament House in Perth, Western Australia. It was part of a broader campaign on the part of community groups to protest against OBE as a specific form of curriculum development for senior secondary students, even though it was already well established in primary and secondary schools. The main criticisms of OBE were that, though it did provide students with access to essential knowledge and skills, it did not provide enough
support for teachers and assessment processes were problematic. These dissatisfactions became magnified in a public campaign led by groups such as People Lobbying Against Outcomes Based Education (PLATO) and it was even possible to buy bumper stickers with slogans such as ‘OBE Fails Kids’ and ‘OBE Destroying Your Kids’ Education’. Eventually, the Health and Education Standing Committee of the Western Australian State Parliament conducted a hearing into OBE, but it resulted in two reports—a Majority Report and a Minority Report—representing different views. The government made some changes, but the timetable for implementing OBE was not changed. Following the reports, the government abandoned the use of the term ‘Outcomes Based Education’, preferring instead ‘Outcomes and Standards Education’.

**Probes**

1. Why do different groups in the community feel so strongly about the school curriculum?

2. In a democratic society, how should these differences be resolved? Why do you think parents felt the need to demonstrate publicly against OBE? Is this the best or only way to make public views known?

**Summary**

- If the curriculum is seen as the means by which young people and adults gain the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be productive and informed citizens in a democratic society, then everyone in the community has a stake in the shape and form that the curriculum takes.

- Politicians and employers look for a skilled and competent workforce. Parents look for the means by which their children can live a rewarding and satisfying life. Advocates of issues and causes want to ensure that students are aware of and sensitive to the major issues that will confront them when they grow up. Society as a whole may wish students to have a grasp of certain basic skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy) and certain kinds of knowledge (e.g. an understanding of the history of their country).

- No one is neutral when it comes to the curriculum. The eventual form that the school curriculum takes in the shape of guidelines or frameworks therefore represents a compromise between groups and individuals in society seeking to influence the education of young people.

- It might be said that the curriculum is constructed by groups and individuals to suit the particular interests they represent. In this sense, the curriculum itself is not neutral—it represents a point of view or a perspective. It is often contested and often the subject of public debate and discussion.
Questions and exercises

1. Who has the most legitimate claim to influence the school curriculum: businesses and governments, or parents and teachers? Do the claims of different groups necessarily have to conflict?

2. What do you think the role of students should be in determining the shape and form of the school curriculum? Do you think everyone in society gets an equal chance to influence the construction of the school curriculum?

3. What does your answer imply for the actual shape that the curriculum takes?

4. Review the definitions of ‘curriculum’ provided in Table 1.1. Which do you agree with? Which do you disagree with?

5. Formulate your own view of the school curriculum based on your reading of this chapter and additional reading selected from the following references. Share your views with one or two colleagues and see what similarities and differences there are. Keep this formulation and come back to it from time to time as you read this text.

References


