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Articulations of teaching practice: a case study of teachers and "general capabilities"

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Abstract The research reported on in this paper is a qualitative case study of secondary school teachers' interpretations of how they work with a component of the Australian national curriculum, the seven "general capabilities." The case study of four secondary school teachers utilized teacher interviews eliciting via descriptive analysis how teachers understand and work with the "general capabilities." The Australian curriculum listing explicit "general capabilities" alongside endorsed disciplines and cross-curriculum priorities requires teachers and their associated classroom practice(s) bond to practical dexterities. Policy expectations are such that the knowledge, skills, behaviors and dispositions of the "general capabilities," along with curriculum content and cross-curriculum priority areas will support students to successfully live and work in the twenty-first century. While policy expectations appear well defined, including expectations that teachers navigate and implement relevant curriculum in creative ways, the study underpinning this paper finds that teachers assert their professional and pedagogic authority over the curriculum by enacting and translating it for the benefit of their students.

Keywords General capabilities · Teachers · Curriculum · Teaching practice · Qualitative research

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Introduction

This paper explores how practising classroom teachers understand and express their work with an aspect of the new Australian curriculum, the general capabilities. The paper draws upon the experiences of four public secondary school teachers from the Australian state of Victoria. Three of the teachers in the study teach in schools located in metropolitan Melbourne and one in country/rural Victoria. All of the teachers involved in the study teach in the disciplines of Science (Chemistry and Biology) and Mathematics across the year levels 7–12 (early secondary to the post-compulsory years).

The curriculum specifies seven general capabilities including literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology (ICT) capability, critical and creative thinking, ethical behavior, intercultural understanding, and personal and social capability (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2012) that students must develop as part of their secondary schooling and their inception forms a major recent development in curriculum reform within Australia. While education policy stipulations outline core twenty-first century concerns, that of ever increasing economic competitiveness and the dislocations and complexities of post-modern existence, it is teachers in classrooms that must make a difference to the lives of young people to prepare them for the new world (see MCEETYA 2008). Quality and equity are important policy concerns in Australia, and education has a vital role in not only simply shaping students' lives, but also in developing their potential beyond the classroom (see MCEETYA 2008).

The paper illustrates that the practice(s) of classroom teachers is not wholly influenced by the policy reforms of the general capabilities. Teachers in this study expressed

their agency by making their own professional decisions about how to implement curriculum material. While teachers incorporated various aspects of the national curriculum including their interpretations of the general capabilities, their pedagogic practice(s) drew upon what they thought worked for their students. In other words, teachers relied upon their interpretations and understanding of what a capable student should be able to "do" rather than be influenced explicitly by the national curriculum and its rhetoric of "shaping the individual as the kind of person with the skills and dispositions required by the global millennium citizen and worker" (Lingard and McGregor 2014, p. 90).

Research design

The research used a qualitative case study research design as it effectively captures the *real-life* context of contemporary teaching practice (Yin 2009). Qualitative case study research provides for a rich, in-depth and extensive examination of the real-life situational context involving its associated and distinctive aspects. This research acknowledges the complexity of teaching practice and understands that teaching and learning is mediated to a significant extent by distinct influences and external sources, for instance, national economic policy. A qualitative case study of teachers and the "general capabilities" constructs knowledge of how individual classroom teachers understand and work with an aspect of contemporary curriculum and how this affects individual teaching practice(s).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually enabling participants to reflect upon their specific personal teaching experiences and practices. Questions asked related to how teachers currently use the national curriculum and aspects of it to plan for classroom teaching experiences. A key concern of the study was to elicit knowledge about how classroom teachers understand and incorporate notable aspects of the general capabilities into their teaching practices. The interviewees were chosen based on their relative experience as secondary Mathematics and Science teachers—five years plus across all year levels (7–12). Pseudonyms are used for all of the participants. Frequent and comprehensive analysis of interview transcripts extracted from the research revealed repeated key themes and arguments. The identified themes served the purpose of organizing data into representative categories. This provided insights into how teachers discuss and understand their practice(s) juxtaposed against current education policy declarations about the general capabilities and the national curriculum. The identified themes interpolated as categories specifically related to (1) understanding the general capabilities as aspects of current

curriculum reform although with no especial significance for individual teaching practice/pedagogy, (2) understanding the general capabilities as policy requirements rather than specific and important curricula elements and (3) understanding the general capabilities as aspects of the national curriculum that already complements individual classroom practice(s).

A new curriculum

The Australian national curriculum has evolved over time (see Harris-Hart 2010), viewed generally as a policy response for a range of educational and economic worries. Recent Australian schooling policy particularly that of key government agencies, including from the Ministerial Council On Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), links aspects of curriculum development and its theoretical conceptualization to specific issues. These include but are not limited to (1) a need for enhancing the continued poor educational performance of Australian school students relative to other similar nations, (2) reducing the achievement gap between students of high and low socioeconomic status and (3) making Australia a more economically competitive nation. Indeed, much of the rhetoric accompanying curriculum reform within Australia is couched in economic terms, the concern being the vital necessity for youth to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation (see MCEETYA 2008) that is in many respects already here and fast approaching. Layered over much that is the policy "talk" of curriculum reform and its development and implementation is a characteristic trail that defines Australian schooling post the 1970s. There is a dual focus to the trail, the first of which is defined by Lingard as the "high point of the social democratic Keynesian settlement of the post-war economic boom years, whereby federal government in school education, particularly school funding, peaked" (2000, p. 26). This period in Australian school education saw major development in many areas including the funding of schools on a needs basis, large-scale capital financing of schools, the funding of school (primary and secondary) libraries, and the introduction of major programs including the disadvantaged schools program and other teacher in-service (professional development) and innovation initiatives. A major policy concern of the time centered on educational opportunity (see Lingard 2000). The second trail is representative of the current economically related interest that education now serves in Australia post the 1970s, one that in more recent times is defined by stringent accountability and testing processes. A post-Keynesian economic framework is in vogue and the

re-booting of school education to take advantage of the new economic world on offer through the centrality of individual skill formation, and the restructurings of the contemporary economic global market-place dominates. The stimuli implicit in much of the policy work sustaining these dual developments is neatly summarized by Ball:

> Within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education. (2008, pp. 11–12)

The consequences for schooling are many (see Gale and Densmore 2003), and for curriculum reflects a practice–action orientation, namely that students need to demonstrate that they "can do things" rather than simply know things (see Yates 2013).

Connected to curriculum reform is an efficiency and quality agenda founded on measurement of school, teacher and student performance. Testing regimes have opened classrooms to "external scrutiny, in order to putatively solve the problem of the unaccountable teacher through making them accountable to and for student performance" (Lingard et al. 2016, p. 1). Global policy discourses of the sort promoted by what Sahlberg (2011) terms the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) focuses attention on "top-down, test-based modes of educational accountability linked to parental choice and market reforms" (Lingard et al. 2016, p. 2). The emphasis on testing and data encloses school education into a policy and knowledge audit infrastructure linking the new Australian curriculum to a broader international assemblage of educational assessment as a response to globalization (see Sobe 2015).

Alongside the development of a national curriculum sits a term that is increasingly used in education and other Australian related policy debates, capability or capabilities. Primarily, the term has a particular conceptual connotation, one that understands current disquiet about student underperformance and for that matter, national economic underperformance in narrowly focused ways (see Gale and Molla 2015). Underlying the term's inception in policy debates and documentation is a functionalist interpretation namely that students need to demonstrate the "capacity to." In many respects, the term in its policy inceptions curbs individual actions and motivations to what is deemed direct "use-value" priorities. A prime example of this is in how the national curriculum conceives knowledge. While the curriculum is comprised of three distinct components that includes disciplinary aspects, a general capabilities component and cross-curriculum priority areas, the seven stated general capabilities of literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology (ICT) capability, critical and creative thinking, ethical behavior, intercultural understanding, and personal and social capability (ACARA 2012) incline towards proven and demonstrable accomplishments. As the general capabilities are there to "…help students become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens" (ACARA 2012, p. 15), they also are thought to provide the practical twenty-first century benefits of a particular set of "skills and understandings that can be traded" (Ditchburn 2012, p. 347) in a growth-oriented economy, one focused in grasping the alleged opportunities on offer in an Asian century (see Henry et al. 2012).

Adopting particular skill sets as part of curriculum change to drive national economic fortunes is not new in Australia. During the latter half of the 1980s for instance, "there was much discussion throughout the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of the need to prepare the workforce for the future to cope with changing industry and the emerging information technology revolution. Building greater human capital was the urgent task for government" (Croucher et al. 2013, p. 2). It was at this time in Australia (the 1980s through to the early 1990s) that a Labor government was steadily fusing aspects of school education policy and national economic development merging "Labor's commitment to social equity…around a wider nation-building agenda in which skills development was paramount to the achievement of economic goals" (James et al. 2013, p. 126). A series of national policy reports all grappled with the evolving and uncertain economic order and how education across all sectors should respond (see The Karmel Committee Report 1985; The Finn Review 1991; The Mayer Committee Report 1992). Policy responses favoured skills and competence-based education particularly at the post-compulsory school level (see Werner 1995).

The policy justification for the seven general capabilities of today much like the competence and skills talk of earlier periods occurred against broader national economic re-considerations. The Rudd/Gillard Labor government (2007–2013) under its "Education Revolution" policy agenda initiated wide-ranging education plans including as part of its widespread accountability structure, the MySchool website which maps and publishes for public view national school performance data based on standardized literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN) in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Other initiatives under the "Education Revolution" banner included (1) the creation of the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leaders (AITSL), their remit focusing on teacher quality, (2) the development and implementation of a national curriculum and (3) the rebuilding of schools (see Lingard 2010). Connected to the education proposals outlined was a larger national

conversation about Australia's future in a rapidly changing century, one defined by the economic and geo-political rise of Asia. Policy chat followed a predictable line about "investing in our people through skills and education to drive Australia's productivity performance" (Henry et al. 2012, p. 2). Particular capabilities are considered necessary so that Australia can take the most advantage of the opportunities on offer in the new Asian century.

> Capabilities that are particularly important for the Asian century include job-specific skills, scientific and technical excellence, adaptability and resilience. Using creativity and design-based thinking to solve complex problems is a distinctive Australian strength that can help to meet the emerging challenges of this century. As a nation we also need to broaden and deepen our understanding of Asian cultures and languages, to become more Asia literate (Henry et al. 2012, p. 2).

Schools and the education system more broadly are integral components in building the capabilities required.

Analysis: conceptions of the general capabilities

A content analysis of interview data was undertaken. Interpretive inferences based on the reading of data were made. Three categories of description were extracted from the data representing teachers' conceptions and expressions of general capabilities. The categories describe how teachers make sense of the general capabilities, in particular, how they view them as an important aspect of the new national curriculum and how they work with them. In category 1, teachers approach the general capabilities as they would most curriculum reform, namely that they are aware of them although not aware of their purported importance regarding broader education reform. In category 2, teachers view the general capabilities as policy requirements rather than as important curriculum elements that could (and should) influence teaching practice(s). In category 3, teachers view the general capabilities as aspects of contemporary curriculum that already complements their classroom practices.

Category 1: general capabilities are seen as nothing new

While most teachers in this study showed an awareness of the general capabilities, this did not translate into any deep-seated understanding of them. Teachers' responses generally reflected the existence of the general capabilities and the policy emphasis on specific student capacities/skills (for example, literacy/numeracy). The general feeling about them as a new curriculum policy reform was well expressed by Lisa, one of the teacher participants, "I don't think there's anything really new about them." In talking about the general capabilities, teachers believed strongly in the use of literacy and numeracy capabilities to understand aspects of, for example, how to manage money.

> Yes. I think as a baseline, literacy and numeracy is really important. I don't think you can get away with not having a basic grasp on literacy and numeracy and it makes it really hard just to function if you're not—if you can't understand where your money goes in the bank and how your pay works and financial planning; if you can't read documents that you're signing and things like that, I think that's really important, super important. (Lisa)

While acknowledging their existence, teachers were not consistently planning and teaching with the general capabilities in mind. This is an interesting point considering that much is often made in the national curriculum about how school must prepare young people for a rapidly transforming future and new world of work.

> I'm aware of what you're alluding to …I believe its [capabilities] are underlying skills that we think students should be able to demonstrate that are strands through the whole curriculum, for instance. (Angus)

> Look, we've heard of those things [the capabilities], probably not as a group, but as individual components, so when we write up our units, we try and make sure that we're catering for a number of those [capabilities], probably not all of those, to be honest, but we try and cater for… and we're always trying to get IT into our classrooms. (Luke)

Teacher reactions to the general capabilities indicated a tacit impact on their overall responsiveness to them. As a specific curriculum and education policy initiative linked to the current school education reform agenda, no significant change to teaching practices was noted by any of the participants. Nonetheless, all tended to endorse their importance and relevance to students in the following terms:

> …[students should] have literacy capability…specific scientific capability, mathematical and numeracy capability. (Angus)

Furthermore, the instigation of general capabilities in the national curriculum prompted some of the teachers to re-visit aspects of their school curriculum in detail. Luke for example noted that at his school, they were seeking to broaden aspects of how teachers address particular capabilities like ethical understanding.

We are looking at a lot of the [curriculum] stuff that we're doing now and looking at the ethics, especially in science related topics such as ecosystems, topics such as chemistry, looking at radioactivity, and the positives, the negatives of it as well, and that brings the ethics capability into it. (Luke)

Also, from interview transcripts, it is clear that while teachers believed they did not explicitly plan and prepare for the inclusion of the general capabilities into their lessons on an everyday basis, their supposed enactment occurred regardless. Lisa, in talking about the capability of Ethical Behavior stated:

Well, in the Year 9 Science class we did brain function and co-ordination and all that sort of stuff and within that we did a brain dissection and so there was a whole kind of bit about ethical treatment of animals and the reasons why or why not you might be concerned about using animal products for educational purposes and talking about, sort of leading into using humans and how we, kind of—what's fair and what's not fair in terms of using animals as testing and all that sort of thing. (Lisa)

Similarly, Luke:

I keep thinking back about the evolution topic [in Year 10 Science] and I think about, why is environmental studies taught, why is it still a component of biology, and it's because we need to understand our environment and things like sustainability, that's a very big topic across a number of different subjects and do the inter-cultural understanding stuff, I think is something that's probably come to the fore in recent times.

Category 2: general capabilities are seen as policy requirements

Pedagogic work particularly that of the school and its teachers instructs by transmitting standard functions inherent in every educational system. The general capabilities likewise were viewed by teachers as some of the new minimum requirements needed now from a school education. Teachers in this study alluded to these new requirements along with inter alia the basic reproductive features of modern schooling.

We need to basically follow a pattern, and follow certain…objectives and. …it is all part of getting more out of our effect size. Effect size is very big at the moment. (Luke)

I think that I suppose it gives you a refocussing to see whether you're ticking the boxes that they're aiming for. (Angus)

The demands of a new national curriculum, however, necessitate added sensitivity to transformative teaching practices beyond those that simply reproduce the status quo. This is difficult to achieve notwithstanding the contemporary complexities of teaching, something that Angus alludes to:

[There are many] stresses on teachers to perform for four or five periods a day at an hour a time, even amongst other issues such as class control, and [teachers] also often do not have the time…[nor] the solid background of knowledge needed. (Angus)

Angus, as a teacher participant, addresses an important point here, in that if we accept (1) that Australia is a pluralist, democratic and cosmopolitan society focused on striding through and meeting the demands of the twenty-first century, then (2) it must re-create teaching practice so that it nourishes each student's potential by parsing the unique and connecting features of it as a specific pedagogic action suited to the times. This means re-orienting most standardized versions of current teaching practice(s) and not be simply:

…pitching to the middle and then hoping that everyone [gets it]. (Lisa)

Lisa again on a related point linked to student abilities and task differentiation.

With Maths, it is a little easier I guess because you can differentiate the questions that students do and things like that and the tasks they do—the amount of work that you give them or the expectation of the detail and if it is a problem-solving task or something like that. I think it is a little bit easier with Maths. Science, sort of slightly more difficult because it is so fact-based, I guess, and you are kind of learning a set of facts and it just kind of comes down to knowing more than the next person. (Lisa)

The general capabilities of the national curriculum are designed to have students develop particular capacities. Contemporary school education policy rhetoric in Australia asserts the central role of the teacher in this process, suggesting specific teaching practices and the individual qualities of the teacher make the difference (see *Students First* 2015) contrary to the dislocations inherent in "the different categories of students and their social and academic characteristics" (Bourdieu and Passeron 2000, p. 91). Teachers interviewed, however, were inclined to acknowledge the social and scholastic features of their students despite policy inferences suggesting as Michael stated that:

…everybody has to be at the same point. (Michael)

Participants in this study recognized that distinctive policy expectations in the "basics" of education (literacy/numeracy for instance) are system-given although for some teachers in this study, a concern was expressed that the general capabilities may not be:

…allowing [students] to flourish and try. (Michael)

On a related point, Luke suggested that the general capabilities are not simply about the transfer of knowledge, they also exemplify basic demonstrable characteristics:

…so, doing things in groups/group work, and giving them immediate feedback [is important]. (Luke)

On a similar point, Lisa commented on the merits of the comfort that lesson predictability brings to some students:

They go to class, they know that they're going to be—if it's a maths class, they know they're going to be working from a text mostly…and they actually quite enjoy that. [Students] like the fact that they know what's expected and that they can sit and get it done. (Lisa)

Developing general capabilities in students is not as simple as knowledge transfer as many variables including available resources impact on learning.

Look, I think that, in some cases—being a parent too, I understand this…a kid's success in a school system is a little bit of a lottery…you know, we are doing…I know that you do the best you can with what you have got. I think that school resources plays into it a bit. Not just money, but also stuff, you know. You would love to have like a pedometer for every kid, but you don't. You'd love to have an inclinometer or different sorts of devices for like a whole class set, but you can't afford that…so [maybe] it comes down to teacher passion, and then once you have a passionate teacher, they do the best they can with what they have got at the given time. (Michael)

While teachers in this study understood the constraints of "the system," they also expressed a desire and willingness to move their students beyond system-designated benchmarks. Michael on this aspect:

So I guess that my approach has been trying to get better at this idea of not simply teaching to some system benchmark and me just giving them [content] and they just collect it, it's about them [students] sort of like searching for it. Then they sort of scaffold their own idea(s). (Michael)

When asked about context and the teaching of the general capability of ICT, for example, as a basic contemporary educational requirement, teachers acknowledged students' familiarity with it.

ICT is a bit of a funny one…the big battle with ICT is that there's so much that can go wrong and so many variables that it's really hard to teach things that the kids don't already know. (Lisa)
The kids give each other just as much feedback [on ICT use], if not better than what I can. They are the ones that have more knowledge about iPads than I do. (Michael)
…young people just naturally are not scared of computers and they work it out. (Angus)

Category 3: general capabilities are seen as complementing current classroom practice(s)

Teachers interviewed indicated that they often sought to contextualize their teaching with regard to curriculum content and new curriculum initiatives. They also expressed their respective understandings of how some of their current classroom practices align with the general capabilities. Luke, for example, mentions that his approach to assessment particularly when teaching Year 9 Science is to allow students to be expressive with their answers to assessment tasks.

An example is when looking at say the Circulatory System and when doing an assessment task (a project); a question that I ask students is for them to think that they are going on a journey through a red blood cell. Write the story of what you see. The students then tell me about their journey where they describe the shape of the red blood cell and they talk about the walls of the different blood vessels, they are talking about their pathway through the different chambers of the heart, so I know that that works well because our students come to school with quite a strong culture of reading and expressing themselves, so that is an assessment task that really lends itself to these students at this school. (Luke)

Luke mentions the fact that students at his school (a high socio-economic status all girls public secondary school) in Melbourne are very expressive and linguistically skilled. Angus states that students at his school are "arts based," and so in Science for example, he aims to incorporate aspects of the Arts to current and relevant science-based topics.

[The project] has the Maths aspect [utilising] empirical data, graphing, and it has the Science investiga-

tion of global warming where we incorporate SOSE…Geography—you know it has got everything. [Other projects using the Arts] included ocean acid-ification. (Angus)

Teachers were also questioned about how they address some of the specific goals of the current national curriculum relating to developing creativity and resourcefulness in their students. Angus, for example, mentions a need for:

> …utilizing quality learning experiences and…more dynamic [teaching methods], so using ICT, multi-media and allowing for different learning styles. It has got a bit of effort in it…trying to develop self-driven student learners. (Angus)

> On the creative side, we're looking at say the ethics, especially topics such as ecosystems, topics such as chemistry, looking at radioactivity, and the positives, the negatives of it as well, and that brings the ethics sort of component in there…being creative with some sort of direction as well…we just finished a year 9 unit on radioactivity and once we've gone through and we've looked at what it is, basically looking at the chemical side of it, then we do a PMI, a positive, negative and improvement area, or what we find interesting. (Luke)

Lisa conversely suggests creativity and quality learning experiences have an aesthetic almost emotional aspect attached.

> I think creativity means that you [the student] come away at the end [of the lesson] feeling happy that you have learned something new or that you have gained something from whatever it was that you did. (Lisa)

She elaborates:

> In Year 10 Science—I am a Biology teacher—so, in Year 10 Biology, teaching inheritance patterns, [I teach] Punnett Squares. It is quite a …there is a seven-step process. You teach students twenty new words and then this seven step process and they are quite confused at the start, but you re-assure them. It is probably one of my favourite things to teach because kids are really frustrated and they are kind of like, oh, there is so much work, it is really hard, but then after they practice and they kind of put things into place it gets easier, there are so many light bulb moments and you can see them helping each other and sorting through it and it is really clear when a kid at the end of a lesson or at the end of a week or whatever says that they can do these Punnett Squares. (Lisa)

Creativity for Michael is more about:

> …open-mindedness…so it is about [setting] the boundaries and having students expressing them-selves…after a couple of these tasks, the kids actually appreciate it. They start to look forward to learning. (Michael)

All of the teachers interviewed also mentioned the notion of higher-order thinking and its relationship to student learning.

> I call it enrichment…a much broader but also deeper investigation into certain topics… more focused. (Angus)

Luke suggests that in his middle school Science classes, higher-order thinking is not simply:

> about memorising…it is about understanding…more focused…[using] description and showing a deep understanding reflecting a strong [knowledge] base. (Luke)

He elaborates with an example:

> So, if we are looking at insulin levels in a diabetic. I might get real life data, show the graph, and ask students to interpret it and explain what the graph says. I ask specific questions. (Luke)

Lisa alternatively looks for a developmental understanding in her students over time:

> it is about questioning things from an educational perspective, if that makes sense…sort of going, okay, you [the student] said this last week, so how come now this week this is what you are saying? (Lisa)

Discussion

Contemporary schooling of which teaching practice is a part occurs in context. Invariably, the context is shaped by specific influences—political, historic, social and economic. Understanding the practice(s) of contemporary schooling including teaching is to also accept that practices are:

> any coherent and complex form of socially estab-lished cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are sys-tematically extended. (MacIntyre 2007, p. 186)

In other words, educational practices form an important component of human interaction and teaching, as a form of human interaction, must be of the highest order to have lasting benefits.

If the value of knowledge "becomes an index of its truth" (Hinchliffe 2007, p. 225) then the national curriculum and its inclusion of general capabilities pre-figures the pedagogic process and endpoints of learning. Curriculum indicators direct learning toward formalized norms with student achievement and learning equating to numerical differences between pre- and post-test standardized curriculum and assessment outcomes. Teaching and learning becomes a question of verification the purpose of which corresponds to a system endorsed and organized grid of accountabilities. Consequently, in a set-up of this kind, effective teaching practice is simply that which is easily measured conforming to disciplinary strands that ultimately gets collated by teachers for reporting purposes. While the teachers in this study understood the general capabilities as another curriculum initiative not much different to the many that over the years have preceded them, they also expressed their view(s) about how their current teaching practice(s) align with them. Teachers in this study do not explicitly draw upon the general capabilities to assist them in the planning or teaching of curriculum despite the claims and expectations of current school policy. In this study, teachers actively exhibited their professional agency and autonomy by determining what in their view was best for their students.

In current times, teachers need to describe and understand their pedagogic actions and how they work with curriculum and assessment insofar as it can transform learning beyond the confines of standardized benchmarks. They need to develop their ability to construct knowledge of how their students learn and make links between their teaching practice(s) and the achievement of students. In simple terms, teachers need to re-conceive engagement in schools, namely situated learning as part of a general theory and approach to their pedagogy beyond imposed limits. Potentially, the general capabilities of the national curriculum reinforce a regulated uniformity. This aligns with the institutional link between curriculum as administrative apparatus and the co-ordination and framing of people's actions and performance for evaluation (see Bernstein 1996; Ladwig 2009). Teachers alluded to this by making reference to "effect sizes" and "ticking all the boxes you are aiming for." Nonetheless, teachers in this study generally reflected their role as curriculum workers, viewing the curriculum not as a "blue-stone document but as a guide" (Angus) and translating aspects of the curriculum in order to find a "…balanced combination of the skills [needed] but also of higher order thinking" (Angus).

At one level, the half-hearted take-up by teachers in this study of the general capabilities is not totally a complete failure of policy implementation particularly if viewed as a "clash between the monopoly of the universal and the dominance of the local in respect of the logics of practice of teachers' work" (Hardy and Lingard 2008, p. 75). Rather, the data show at the very least, that teachers continue adopting on the whole normative pedagogic approaches, despite the current reforms of a national curriculum and general capabilities superficially implying an education tailored to the needs of individuals. This is probably to be expected because the general capabilities reinforce an orthodoxy of practice and curriculum one that Lingard and McGregor characterize as "framed through a visioning of future workers, citizens and a desired future world" (2014, p. 99).

Furthermore, even those interactions between teacher and students that seemingly promote a sense of student-led autonomy, providing on the surface at least, a sense of educational harmony, are structured by the relations between prevailing system conditions. The illusion is then promoted of a durable communication between transmitter (teacher) and receiver (student) of the educational message, so that the productivity of the pedagogic technique is itself a reductive nonentity. However, at the same time, participants in this study demonstrated a sense of the adherence needed to a consecrated style of learning for success in an education system focused on "outputs."

Teaching in many respects is "always local, situated, emergent, and linked with prior practice" (Coburn and Stein 2006, p. 42). Conforming to what in many respects are some of the fundamentals of contemporary teaching practice, group work, integrated projects and enquiry-based learning, while necessary, provide no real substitute for the demands of a twenty-first century curriculum. This orthodoxy of practice comprising the basic instruments of pedagogic knowledge is undisputed. The unique challenge of developing in teachers a capacity for thoughtful deliberation about the intellectual intricacies of their job remains, given the interminable and heightened pressures (economic/social) that school education policy infers. In pedagogic terms what appears as self-evident, the doxa (see Bourdieu 2004) of contemporary educational thinking regarding teaching practices and student achievement doubtless lacks sufficient potency. Consequently, moving beyond the taken for granted in teaching practice(s) means developing in classroom teachers, a new pedagogic understanding, one that in all likelihood, takes up the policy reforms linked to the national curriculum, the needs of the times and more importantly, develops the educative potential of all students. These notions are consistent with a framework of teacher agency that is not only about how teachers position themselves apropos of curriculum reform,

but how they engage with it for the benefit of their students. In other words, teachers like those in this study "confront the policies and professional discourses they encounter not as tabulae rasae, but rather actively use their own pre-existing identities to interpret, learn from, evaluate, and appropriate the new conditions of their work in schools and classrooms" (Buchanan 2015, p. 701)

Conclusion

The teachers in this study did not view themselves as "change agents" nor were they necessarily critical of the authoritative discourses (Britzman 1991) surrounding the education and curriculum reforms of recent times. Their efforts were solely directed towards providing their students with what they considered was the best education possible within the confines of the curriculum on offer. To realize this, teachers worked with and interpreted the national curriculum in ways that responded to the demands of contemporary education practice, seeking opportunities to move the learning of their students forwards.

While the study in this paper is small (four teachers), it nonetheless indicates how some teachers in mainstream public (government) secondary schools in Australia work with and understand an aspect of the new curriculum, the general capabilities. The data revealed not only that teachers actively adapt to new curriculum reforms, they proactively draw on their individual pedagogic techniques to engage students in the new national curriculum. This confirms the opportunity that teachers have to "actively construct themselves in particular ways" despite the "larger force relations" (Buchanan 2015, p. 705) involving the hegemonic discourses of reform and accountability prevalent in contemporary school education policy. In short, the teachers in this study affirmed their professional pedagogic authority through what for them was their creative and responsive application of curriculum content.

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