



The overcrowded primary curriculum: a way forward

**Recommendations from the
Australian Primary Principals Association**

November 2014

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The Overcrowded Primary Curriculum

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) believes that the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum has led to substantial overcrowding in the curriculum for primary schools. We note that the Review of the Australian Curriculum supports this view:

There is no doubt that the issue that has caused the greatest amount of angst is the amount of content teachers are required to teach. This issue did not come as a surprise. The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) has consistently articulated this concern, and it was echoed throughout the consultation process... The Reviewers are convinced that immediate and substantial action is required to address the overcrowding of the primary curriculum. (Donnelly and Wiltshire, 2014: 3)

This paper addresses three questions:

1. To what extent is the curriculum overcrowded?
2. Why did the overcrowding occur?
3. What should be done to reduce overcrowding?

To what extent is the curriculum overcrowded?

This section of the paper sets out the evidence for overcrowding in four categories: the number of subjects in the curriculum, the extent of the documents, the amount of time allowed for teaching and learning content elements, and the views of APPA members.

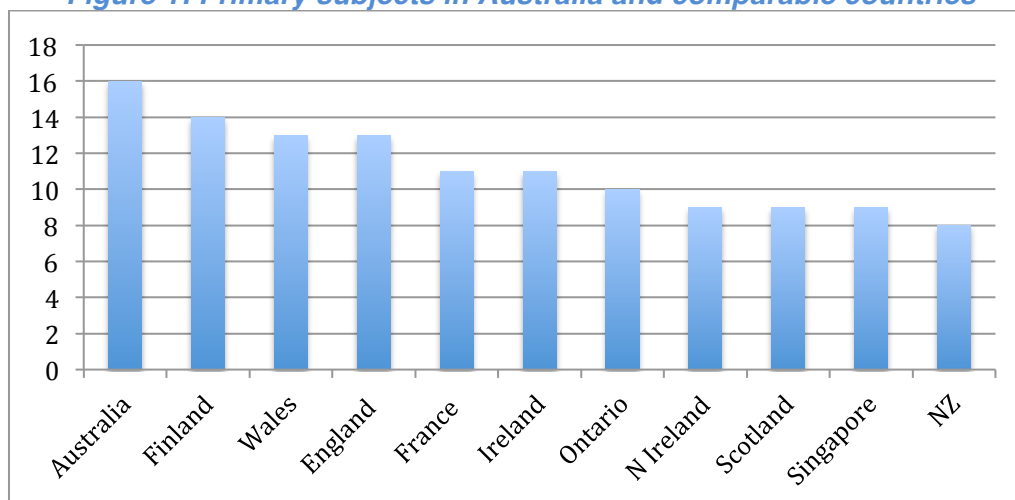
1. Number of subjects

ACARA identifies sixteen subjects within eight learning areas to be taught in the primary years (F-6). The Australian Curriculum includes more subjects than curricula in comparable jurisdictions. The table below shows the comparison.

It can be noted from the comparison that the average across other countries examined is fewer than 11 subjects. No other country has more than 14 subjects. Economics and Business is not evident as a subject in any of the 10 other countries examined. The area of The Arts is usually captured in two or three domains and none of the other countries reviewed has five domains in The Arts. Civics and Citizenship, while present in some form in three jurisdictions, is usually not a separate domain.

While simple subject numbers are not in themselves conclusive, this analysis suggests that Australia has thrown the primary curriculum net somewhat wider than comparable jurisdictions.

Figure 1: Primary subjects in Australia and comparable countries



Source: Grayson et al, 2014 and documents cited in Bibliography part 2

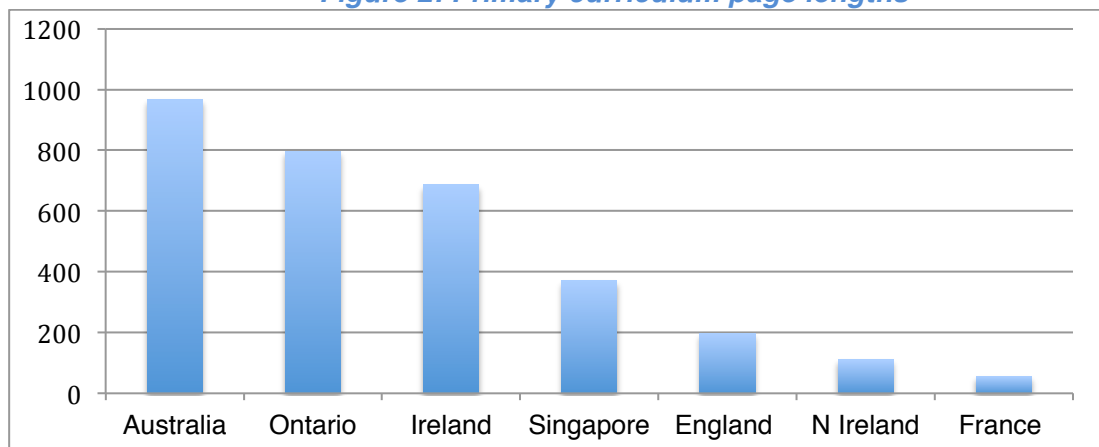
2. Volume of content: measures of page lengths and words

A second measure of overcrowding is the volume of content in the specified curricula. One way of measuring this is to calculate the number of pages or words of text taken to describe the curriculum. While this is not in any way a perfect measure of content, it is suggestive of the amount of material the curriculum covers. At one level, it is a strong measure of general overcrowding such that, if teachers have to read a greater number of pages to understand the curriculum, they will take longer to understand what is expected of them.

On this measure, too, Australia's curriculum is more extensive than others. In Australia, a downloaded version of the documents defining the curriculum amounts to over 1700 pages of text and 568,000 words¹, about the same length as the Standard English edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 2010). For the primary curriculum the total is 1173 pages and 375,000 words. If Languages is excluded (on the basis that a classroom teacher will not usually teach the area), it still consists of 966 pages and 296,000 words.

By comparison, the chart below shows page lengths of primary curriculum documents in a number of countries, beginning with France (56 pages, or about one-sixth of the Australian Curriculum document for Humanities and Social Sciences) and Northern Ireland (110 pages) and ending with Australia at just under 1000 pages. The English Primary National Curriculum document, for example, at 52,000 words is about 14% of the length of Australia's version. The Northern Ireland version is under 37,000 words, less than 10%. And while previous State and Territory primary curriculum documents were mostly in the upper half of this range, none was as long as the Australian Curriculum. It is well noted that the number of pages does not determine the quality or otherwise of a curriculum document.

Figure 2: Primary curriculum page lengths



Source: see documents cited in Bibliography part 2

One notable difference between international jurisdictions concerns whether the primary curriculum is described in a single separate document (e.g. England and Northern Ireland) or in a series of subject-based documents (e.g. Singapore, Ontario and Ireland).

Because the Australian Curriculum is presented in an accessible digital form with sophisticated search options, users can download or read online only those elements which assist them in using or understanding the document. It is presumed that ACARA has developed the documents to this length so as to provide a full and comprehensive understanding of the curriculum. Should this be the case it would be expected that teachers read them in their entirety. The absence of clear guidance to teachers about what is

¹ Calculations were made by downloading version 7.2 from the Australian Curriculum website (ACARA, 2014a)

mandatory, what is optional and which parts of the total are essential reading means that the classroom teacher has to make an essentially uninformed decision about how much of this material to read and use in program planning. Primary teachers would struggle to include in teaching programs everything the documents suggest ought to be part of the curriculum.

3. Teaching time allocated

The third element in determining the extent of overcrowding is the amount of teaching time allocated to each content description in each subject or learning area, using ACARA's notional time allocations for writers (ACARA 2013: 9) as the measure of the amount of teaching time required for the curriculum in each area. APPA has compared these time allocations during the primary years with the number of content descriptions in each learning area and subject to determine how much time is available in ensuring that all children come to understand each content description.

It might be expected that, while individual content descriptions will inevitably cover varying amounts of content requiring different teaching and learning time for students, overall the content descriptions in different subjects or learning areas would, on average, take a similar amount of learning time. In other words, content descriptions in each learning area at each year level or phase are about as easy or hard for students as those in other learning areas at that stage of schooling.

The most striking pattern in the table below is that the more time available to the learning area in the primary years, the more time is allocated to each content description and, conversely, the less time allocated to the area, the less time allocated to each content description. So those areas that are allocated less time do not deal with this by reducing the number of content descriptions; rather it is dealt with by reducing the amount of time teachers have to teach each content description.

Table 1: Hours per content description (CD) by subject

Domain²	Total hours over F-6	Average hours/year	Average CDs/year	Time per CD
English	1650	235.7	31.9	7.4
Mathematics	1220	174.3	21.7	8.0
Health and PE	560	80.0	9.9	8.1
Science	400	57.1	13.7	4.2
Arts	320	45.7	8.6	5.3
Technology	260	37.1	7.1	5.2
Geography	220	31.4	11.7	2.7
History	220	31.4	12.3	2.6
Economics & Business	40	20.0	8.0	2.5
Civics & Citizenship	80	20.0	11.5	1.7

Source: ACARA, 2013; ACARA, 2014a

Our conclusion from this analysis is that time allocations were not considered realistically as a determinant of content to be covered. This is despite consistent guidance from ACARA documents that this should be the case. The result of not taking a sensible account of the time allocations is that teachers are asked to manage the delivery of effective teaching and student learning in unreasonably limited amounts of time.

² APPA has followed the ACARA time allocations in listing the four Humanities and Social Sciences subjects separately, but not The Arts or Technology subjects.

APPA does not support the original ACARA decisions about percentage time notionally attributed to each learning area. APPA's view is that these allocations, in seeking to provide time for the wider range of subjects included in the curriculum, have assumed a material reduction in the amount of time teachers are expected to spend on English in the early years. On the basis of the Australian Curriculum notional time allocations, a teacher in the F-2 years is anticipated to spend 405 minutes each week in English, or 27% of the available time. APPA has compared this with its own research on the actual programs of primary teachers, reported in 2007. This research showed that F-2 teachers across Australia spent an average of 621 minutes each week in English, a total of 41% of the average available teaching time (Angus et al, 2007: 17). Time allocations propose that teachers spend 3.5 hours less teaching English each week than research suggests had been occurring prior to the development of the Australian Curriculum.

4. Views of primary school principals

The fourth indicator we cite to support the argument that overcrowding has occurred is the views of primary school principals. A survey conducted this year to collect data on how well primary schools felt they were placed to deliver the Australian Curriculum showed that principals are deeply concerned. Asked whether they were able to implement the 16 subjects in the primary curriculum within 80% of the school day, as ACARA suggests should be possible, over 88% said 'No' and 83% said they did not have the fiscal resources to do so. Over 64% said they could not deliver all five Arts strands. Almost 75% said they could not deliver Design and Technology. Almost 87% said their schools did not have the knowledge and skills to deliver Economics and Business. (APPA, 2014)

In our view, the four forms of evidence cited here suggest that the Australian Curriculum is substantially overcrowded in the number of primary subjects it includes, the amount of pages and corresponding large word count across the primary curriculum documents, the inadequate time allocations to English and the excessive content for the time available for the teaching of some subjects. The views of principals support this conclusion.

Why did the overcrowding occur?

The purpose in briefly outlining our views as to the sources of this problem is simply to assist in avoiding the same mistakes in future. This is particularly so in any process undertaken to implement the recommendations of the Review of the Australian Curriculum. In summary, our view about the reasons for the current overcrowding is that:

- The formal processes for consultation on Australian Curriculum drafts and papers were largely satisfactory, but a fair process did not lead to a satisfactory outcome.
- We are less positive about the development stage, because of the limited extent to which primary educators were involved. It is possibly inevitable that, if the curriculum is essentially defined by a subject framework and developed within that framework, those engaged in defining a subject area are likely to be, or to become, wholly committed to that area. They are further committed to maintaining its scope and significance within the whole curriculum. We argue that subject-based writers and advisers in each area engaged in – whether intentionally or unintentionally – a claim for territory. The consequence of this is the overcrowding of the documents and, ultimately, the curriculum. This experience is not confined to Australia. The Cambridge Primary Review argued that the development process for the English national curriculum was one cause of overcrowding in the early curriculum documents:

The problem arose not so much from the original 10-subject specification as from the way each programme of study was independently devised for the National Curriculum Council by a group of specialists eager to take advantage of the opportunity to secure

the strongest possible foothold for their subject by spelling out content in irrefutable detail. Whether in combination the 10 programmes of study would be logistically feasible appeared not to matter. (CPR 2009: 6)

- An example of the influence of this subject orientation is the development of a separate, though very similar, introduction to each domain. It might be argued that in the secondary years separate introductions are needed because teachers mostly teach a small number of subjects and would not necessarily read and become familiar with other subject documents. However, it is difficult to see the argument for a separate introduction to each subject, covering very similar territory, for primary teachers who usually teach across the curriculum. By contrast, the introduction to the entire primary curriculum in England is eight pages, while in Northern Ireland it covers 10 pages.
- A further issue affecting overcrowding was the absence of an early and definitive framework for the whole curriculum. Such a framework would have provided a more than useful structure and direction for teachers and parents. This absence was described by the Review of the Australian Curriculum as 'the missing step' (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014: 97). APPA was not alone, again in 2009, in suggesting:

APPA is seriously concerned that the development of subject documents is occurring without proper attention to the whole curriculum....The writers and the NCB must remain conscious of the other subjects which schools have to cover, and in particular of the core responsibilities of primary schools for establishing a foundation in literacy and numeracy. (APPA, 2009: 2)

- Consultation on a jurisdiction and subject basis exacerbated the overcrowding problem, as claims for additional material were accepted and documents sometimes expanded in the process.

The next section of this paper sets out our views about how the current review and redevelopment process should be managed to avoid making the same mistakes again.

What should be done to reduce overcrowding?

APPA notes the recommendations in the Review of the Australian Curriculum aimed at addressing overcrowding. The Review also makes a number of recommendations about particular subjects and learning areas.

APPA notes in particular the two options offered by the Review for the structure of the curriculum (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014: 143-6). While not fully supporting either model, APPA's general preference is for that proposed by Professor Wiltshire, since it offers the better hope of materially reducing overcrowding in the primary years. We recognise the value in reducing the subject range in this model, achieved by integration of Humanities and Social Sciences into a single subject in the primary years. APPA supports the intention to shift content from the earlier to the later years. APPA proposes a model (see Fig 3 below) following similar principles to that proposed by Professor Wiltshire.

The guiding principle for the approach proposed is to achieve a smaller core of essential content within a rich curriculum. APPA argues that, at all points, the body of content prescribed in the Australian Curriculum should be reduced. This can be achieved by:

- introducing specific learning areas and subjects somewhat later (and in one case not at all) in the primary years of schooling;
- being clear about which subjects should be mandatory and which should be optional or at school discretion; and

- reducing the number of content descriptions (and in some cases the scope of content covered in each description) to the number that can realistically be taught and learned in depth, in a normal classroom, in the time available.

APPA also takes the view that all areas of the curriculum should be taught only if time and resources are adequate to teach them well. This applies most specifically to Languages. While there is support for the teaching of Languages in primary schools, APPA rejects their inclusion in the curriculum where adequate time is not made available, and/or there is not a qualified teacher, and/or the specific language cannot be maintained over a period of years.

APPA notes that there have been suggestions that primary schools could deal with the problem of overcrowding by integrating elements of the curriculum through themes or domains. While there are many cases of outstanding practice in curriculum integration, it should not be seen as a time-saver. Integrating areas of curriculum does not reduce the scope of student learning, or the time to be spent teaching key concepts and ensuring that all children understand them. The material to be covered in the curriculum still has to be covered, and children will need roughly the same amount of time and support regardless of the pedagogical or organisational approach adopted.

As a general principle, each content description included should be allocated approximately eight hours teaching time, as already occurs in some learning areas, with significant variations to be formally justified. The test should be whether a teacher in a regular classroom can deliver the curriculum in the time available to a group of students with all the variation and range in capacity, orientation and experience that groups of children show. As the Review of the Australian Curriculum notes, reporting respondent views about the causes of overcrowding, the development of the documents:

...should have begun with school and classroom practice realities, especially in primary school and particularly in the early years. (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014: 139)

Recommendations

1. Establish a set of principles for any revision arising from the Review of the Australian Curriculum to ensure the process leads to a positive outcome. These could include:
 - a. effective representation of current primary school teachers in undertaking and advising on the redevelopment;
 - b. effective representation of primary organisations, and academics and curriculum experts with primary experience, in undertaking and advising on the redevelopment;
 - c. development of a different set of writer guidelines for the primary curriculum to those used for the secondary curriculum, reflecting the primary focus on literacy and numeracy and the ways of working that are characteristic of primary classrooms;
 - d. giving priority to literacy and numeracy throughout the primary school curriculum, and especially in the first three years;
 - e. strict adherence to notional time limitations and a requirement that writers and advisory groups demonstrate how the content outlined can be delivered at depth, in a normal classroom, in the time available; and
 - f. establishment of an independent process for analysis of consultation feedback and determination of actions to be taken in response to consultation.
2. Develop a much briefer dedicated document describing the whole primary curriculum for use by classroom teachers, including:
 - a. a single introduction to the entire curriculum of no more than 10 pages; and

- b. only those content elements that are determined to be essential in each learning area.
3. Increase the notional time allocation for English and Mathematics throughout primary schooling and especially in Years F-2. For English in F-2, increase time significantly to enable a strong focus not only on the subject of English but also on literacy related to, and found in, other learning areas.
4. Vary the current arrangements for introduction or representation of the following subjects during the primary years:
 - a. Remove Economics and Business from the primary curriculum, introducing the area only in the secondary years (see Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014: 202);
 - b. Remove the separate study of Civics and Citizenship from the primary years but include elements related to the area in the History curriculum;
 - c. Include History and Geography as components of Humanities and Social Sciences from Year 3, and leave to schools decisions about integration;
 - d. Remove the formal study of the two Technology subjects from the primary curriculum, but ensure that those elements directly relevant to other learning areas and especially to English, Mathematics and Science are included in those areas; and
 - e. Provide a time allocation to The Arts in keeping with the APPA model but also recognise that schools, supported by their communities, will always offer a set of experiences in The Arts that will broaden student contact with the range of Arts subjects (see Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014: 219).
5. Review content descriptions as follows:
 - a. Review and, where necessary, reduce content descriptions in all areas to ensure that they focus only on what is essential. Make clear which elements of content are essential, leaving the inclusion of additional elements to schools;
 - b. Review content descriptions in all areas on the premise that adequate time must be available to teach the material specified in a regular classroom; and
 - c. Proceed on the basis that each content description will, on average, require eight hours teaching time, and require that any significant variations to this is to be justified by those proposing such a variation.
6. Recognise and communicate that Languages can only be taught effectively in primary schools if there is a qualified teacher available, if adequate time is available, and if the language can be maintained for a period of years.
7. Develop and undertake a research study to monitor time taken to teach elements of content in depth and to provide advice to ACARA about areas in which further refinement might be needed.
8. Establish an independent and expert review panel that will exam, analyse and evaluate any change to the Australian Curriculum relevant to primary schools, the Curriculum's impact on the learning and achievements of students, and the staffing and resourcing available to primary schools to fully and successfully implement the Curriculum. In the main, such a panel would be made up of persons with a strong knowledge of, and experience in, primary school education.

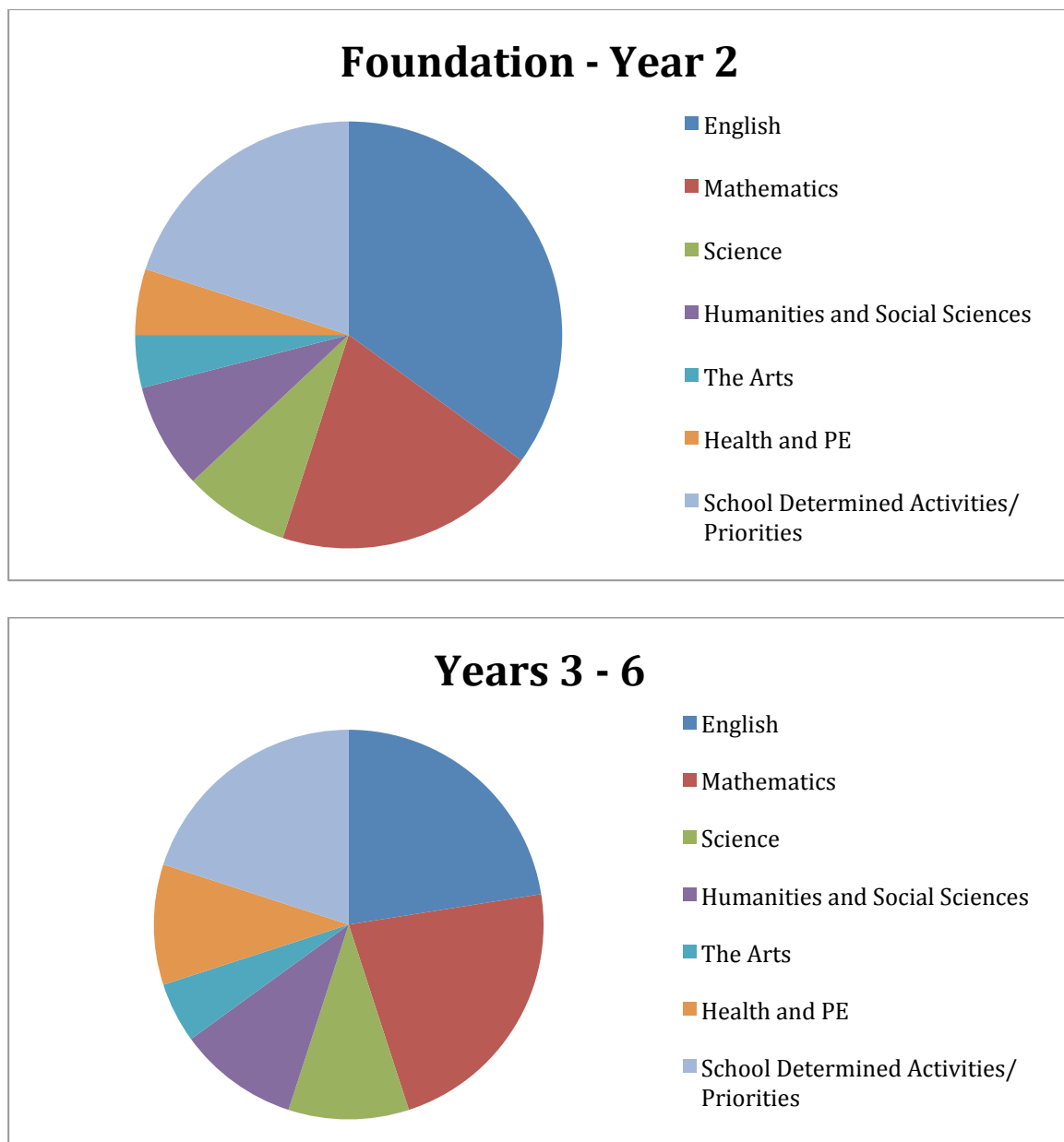
Based on the structural changes proposed here, our model for the primary curriculum is illustrated below. Note that, while time allocations are not specifically stated they show that there is a clear emphasis and time allocation devoted to what APPA recognises as the core

of the primary school curriculum – English (literacy), Mathematics (numeracy), Science, and the Humanities and Social Sciences. The early years have a greater focus on these areas together with an amount of time for school determined activities and priorities.

Languages have not been included because there is as yet no policy on the area and it is our view that Languages should only be taught when circumstances indicate positive learning outcomes for students. Should a school decide to teach a specific language (or provide, for example, cultural-based lessons), focus on additional areas of The Arts, teach explicit technology skills (rather than see technology as a tool for learning) or place a greater emphasis on any area of the curriculum, the time required would come from that teaching time not yet allocated and shown below as ‘School Determined Activities / Priorities’.

APPA supports the view that the Australian Curriculum gives national direction so necessary to achieve high quality outcomes for every child in every school. The changes detailed in this paper produce a dramatically simplified curriculum that is workable in the wide range of settings found in Australian primary schools.

Figure 3: APPA curriculum model for primary schools



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Bibliography part 2: Curriculum documents used to calculate page lengths of primary curriculum

This section of the Bibliography lists the curriculum documents consulted to calculate pages used to define the curriculum in each jurisdiction studied. The analysis does not claim to be a precise measure, since page content obviously varies. It does, however, give a sense of the dramatic differences between jurisdictions in the space taken to describe the curriculum.

In each case, the sections of the documents relating to language study apart from study of the language of instruction were eliminated because language curriculum documents vary so widely between jurisdictions and do not necessarily reflect time allocated to subjects or volume of content. In some jurisdictions, for example, each language is separately described (e.g. Australia), while in others language curriculum is briefly outlined (e.g. England).

Australia

ACARA. 2014. *The Australian Curriculum v 7.2* downloaded from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/download/f10>

Searched on all learning areas and subjects (other than Languages), Year levels F-6, all curriculum elements and all curriculum dimensions, downloaded in pdf form.

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(English translation available at:
frenchschoolsnorthamerica.org/documentspdf/french_curriculum.pdf)