

## The Australian Curriculum: Continuing the National Conversation

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Basil Bernstein (1975, p. 85) argued that the stakes are high in the struggle over the selection, organisation and assessment of what a society counts as valid knowledge. This is because what knowledge is selected, how it is taught, and how it is evaluated in schools goes to the very heart of issues of individual and social identity. As Rob Moore (2007, p. 3) argues 'what we *know affects who we are* (or are perceived to be). Issues of knowledge entail issues of identity'. Questions around the Australian curriculum have focused on issues of content – the question of what is selected as valuable knowledge, and form – the question of how the selected knowledge is organized within and across stages of schooling. This type of questioning inevitably leads to particular types of discussions around knowledge, teaching, learning, and assessment.

The release of the Australian Curriculum in March 2011 was a result of a period of wide consultation. We note public and professional debate around the latest endeavour to develop a national curriculum has tended to focus on issues of form and content rather than whether a national curriculum is needed. The official political rationale given for a national standardisation of the curriculum remained largely uncontested in the media, and in several consultation responses. There appeared to be a sense of inevitability in the consultation phase and the parameters for debate and discussion seemed to be clearly demarcated or confined. The consultation opportunities that were generated included: public website surveys, forums at state/territory level with key stakeholders, national panel meetings with a range of 'experts', meetings with professional associations and state/territory authorities, participation in trial schools and teachers, and critical readers and reviewers across the country (see <http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/consultation.html#1>). However, some commentators suggested that the time frame for consultation was restrictive and prohibited the generation of meaningful and substantive conversations (Allum, 2009). In addition, concerns were raised about equitable state and regional access and participation in the national curriculum conversation (Atweh & Clarkson, 2010).

Our task in writing this paper is to identify some areas of the national curriculum that remain sites of struggle and should be the subject of further debate and discussion, at least in the mind of the five contributors to this Special Issue. We identify the following aspects of the Australian Curriculum that are still contested.

### ***Why an Australian Curriculum?***

At least four contributors in this Special Issue (Aubusson, Atweh and Goos, Gilbert and Brennan) questioned whether the rationale(s) given for an Australian Curriculum (i.e., efficient use of resources, achieving world standard curriculum, ensuring curriculum consistency) were based on a political rather than an educational agenda. Moreover, Brennan questioned whether these goals were actually achievable through a national

curriculum initiative. Many of the contributors suggested that there already is considerable curricular consistency or standardisation particularly in the disciplinary fields of science and mathematics (Aubusson, Atweh & Goos). In addition, Aubusson and Brennan stated that current curriculum models in Australia have served the nation well in terms of international benchmarking data. This data indicates that Australia has a high quality education system. However, it performs less well in terms of addressing issues of educational inequality (McGraw, 2007). Research has clearly shown that issues of educational inequality are best addressed at the local level of the school and classroom by teachers actively engaged in diagnosing learning difficulties and adapting curriculum to suit the needs of specific cohorts of students (see Glasswell, et al., 2008). The question of how a national curriculum might add value to addressing issues of educational inequality and student engagement remains unresolved. Indeed, Brennan proposed that a federated system of education may have benefits over a unitary model, and points to countries such as the USA, Canada and Germany that have chosen not to go down the national curriculum path.

### ***What role(s) should the curriculum play?***

All five contributions to this collection question the framing of the disciplinary curriculum documents. On the one hand, Aubusson reports on interviews with science educators who suggest that the science curriculum does not constitute a syllabus because it does not contain a lot of detail. Rather, the document provides broad guidelines and direction. From this perspective it is a 'bold' document focussed on trying to get learners engaged in scientific knowledge and inquiry. But Aubusson questions whether a national curriculum is the best strategy for achieving the goal of learner engagement in science. Rather, research shows that learner engagement is best achieved through 'pedagogy, school science environments, teacher preparation and professional learning'. On the other hand, Brennan suggests that the national curriculum with its emphasis on 'specifying content and sequence of content by year level of schooling' is a syllabus rather than a curriculum document. Gilbert also picks up on this theme, arguing that the essential requirements of successful curriculum include (1) clarity of purpose and intended outcomes, (2) an effective rationale and framework for selecting knowledge content and (3) a central explanatory framework which gives the curriculum its intellectual power. His paper questions the adequacy of the Australian history curriculum against the above criteria.

So within the set of papers there are contestations around the terms syllabus and curriculum, as well as the criteria by which to judge the adequacy of specific curriculum documents.

### ***What is the rationale guiding the different subject areas?***

The debate on the curriculum is as strong within each discipline area as it is between subject areas. Debates within each disciplinary area include views on the nature of the discipline and its role in the overall aims of student learning. Several authors in this collection have expressed concerns about the conceptualisations of their respective disciplinary areas.

In discussing the science curriculum, Aubusson indicates how the focus placed on 'Science as a Human Endeavour' is considered to be a huge improvement to previous science curriculum initiatives. However, many of the respondents interviewed by Aubusson lamented the absence of the term scientific literacy (see Christensen, 2007), an international trend in the field of science education, which seemed at odds with the stated purposes of the curriculum. In the mathematics curriculum, Atweh and Goos argued that the development of an appreciation of mathematics for its beauty and elegance, and developing mathematics that is useful for careers and jobs and further study (goals identified in the mathematics curriculum), need to be seen as secondary to the development of mathematics that has the

capacity to understand and transform aspects of the lives of students, both as current and future citizens.

In discussing the history curriculum, Gilbert argued that it fails to present a justification for its role as a compulsory school subject. The current justification appears to have emerged from political and popular media pressures, rather than on the basis of sound educational rationales. Moreover, Gilbert argues that the debate about the history curriculum has focused on 'which history to teach' rather than on 'why teach history'. Consequently, the conversations about history curriculum have been narrowly delineated. This means that there has been a deafening silence around some crucial issues. One such crucial issue is which approach to the history curriculum, out of all possible approaches, is best suited for Australia right now. In addition, Gilbert suggests that the final history curriculum document generates an illusion of consensus and smooths over the controversies within the history education community. This, he argues, sheds some doubt on its ability to provide quality learning outcomes for students.

The relationship between disciplinary and school knowledge is also addressed by Macken-Horarik who argues that the principles underpinning the national English curriculum, namely, coherency, cumulative knowledge and portability are flawed as they fail to acknowledge that subject English has 'very different orientations to disciplinarity', 'is an unstable epistemological mix', and is 'an heterogeneous subject'. She proposes an alternative way of conceptualising subject English which takes into account the different curriculum modes that have informed the discipline over time, namely, growth model, skills model, cultural heritage model, and cultural analysis model.

### ***What constitutes valid knowledge?***

Knowledge is socially constructed, and therefore all knowledge 'bears traces of the social' (Moore, 2007, p. 18). However, the various authors, perhaps as a result of their disciplinary orientation, differ in their relative positioning in terms of weak or strong versions of social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). Weak versions of social construction or social realist perspectives advise that:

knowledge is socially produced, but at the same time has the capacity to *transcend* the social conditions under which it is produced. ... The emergent property of knowledge is itself intrinsically *social* - it is something that *people* do in a particular, socially organized, way. It depends upon a distinctive 'configuration' ... of values, principles and social procedures that became institutionalized and achieved sufficient autonomy from traditional sites of power (the state, religion) to constitute itself as a culture and model of social organisation in its own right. (Moore, 2007, p. 18)

Each of the papers in this collection question the epistemological principles of their respective disciplines, not only which version of knowledge is legitimate, but whose version of knowledge is legitimated in the official state discourse of the Australian curriculum? This raises further questions about which group gets access to privileged and privileging forms of knowledge, and thereby reaps the benefits of schooling in terms of life choices and trajectories?

In addition, many of the commentators point to the heavy emphasis on content knowledge as opposed to process knowledge in the national curriculum documents (see for example Macken-Horarik and Gilbert). Theorists such as Basil Bernstein (2000) have argued that a process curricular orientation prioritises the inherent competencies of the learner, constructs the teacher as facilitator, and tends to be used in early years schooling and/or with students at risk of educational failure. In this model of curriculum, teachers and students have greater autonomy and control over what is taught and learnt, when, where and how.

Moreover, effective implementation of this type of curricular model requires significant initial and ongoing professional development of teachers. Aubusson and Atweh and Goos argue that a content based curriculum based on disciplinary divisions within mathematics and science could fail to provide students with the opportunity to participate in real world authentic situations that require interdisciplinary approaches. Gilbert argues that a content base curriculum may lead to overcrowding and a focus on learning historical facts rather than historical modes of inquiry. Macken-Horarik suggests that the focus on content in the English curriculum is the main source of mounting concern by professional organisations representing the concerns of many English teachers.

The crucial question that remains unanswered is what does this shift in curriculum orientation signal? Bernstein (2000; p. 66) argued 'Curricula reform today arises out of the requirements to engage with ... contemporary cultural, economic and technological change'. Does the current form of the national curriculum effectively engage with these contemporary social changes?

### ***What are the Implicit Models of Pedagogy?***

Aubusson proposes two scenarios for how the national science curriculum might be implemented by teachers. Scenario one is around trust in teacher professionalism and knowledge exchange, and Scenario two is around standardisation, compliance and control. The first scenario is likely to treat teachers as professionals capable of interpreting curriculum documents in relation to the learning needs of cohorts of students, and planning learning/teaching resources to ensure effective learning outcomes. The second scenario could lead to increasing regulation over the work of teachers, and increasing disengagement of the profession. Aligning the national curriculum to national testing regimes is likely to take the Australian schooling sector down the path of the US high stakes testing which many have argued 'regulates pedagogy in poor schools, and stops teachers from generative transformative pedagogies that could make a difference' (Au, 2008, p. vii). From this perspective, it is important to question the implicit models of pedagogy (teaching, learning and the knowledge generated in this encounter) in the Australian national curriculum (see Lusted, 1986).

Of crucial concern to Macken-Horarik is teachers' knowledge base to implement this type of national curriculum. She argues that teachers need to develop a common meta-language for talking about subject English, but this requires significant investment in pre-service and ongoing teacher professional development. Similarly, Gilbert talks of the need for a common language to talk about the history curriculum, one founded on 'meta-historical concepts'.

### ***What does a Future-orientation mean?***

A major principle behind the development of the Australian Curriculum, highlighted in much of the political and media rhetoric, is its future-orientation. Two contributions in this collection have raised questions as to whether this version of the curriculum is indeed future oriented. Brennan argues that a Tylerian construction of the curriculum based on separate disciplinary subjects might be contrary to the needs of a future-oriented curriculum. Atweh and Goos reflect on the mathematics curriculum using the lens of future-orientation. They argue that a future orientation could be best achieved by a concentration on new basics and generic capabilities, rather than disciplinary content knowledge, and by a deeper conceptualisation of the role of technologies that may change the nature of knowledge (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001). In addition, Gilbert suggests that the focus of the history curriculum is on facts which hark back to a by-gone era from the standpoint of the present. And Macken-Horarik points to the potential 'present tense' of learning given that the principles

underpinning the literacy tasks and processes included in the English curriculum are invisible or not explicit to learners.

A number of the authors thus point to either a past or present temporal orientation in the current form of the Australian curriculum. The debate about the role of disciplinary, process and generic knowledge remains open in particular in the light of the work of sociologists such as Basil Bernstein (2000) who wrote about the national curriculum reforms in the UK. Bernstein (2000) suggested that the disciplinary (singular) mode of the curriculum code although 'based on a past narrative of the dominance and significance of the disciplines' (p.61) is more likely to exhibit a future orientation for the learner than curriculum codes that prioritise process learning. By contrast, process oriented modes of curriculum (e.g., liberal progressive, popular, and radical) emphasise where the learner is at, and the inherent competencies of learners, rather than performance oriented learning outcomes. He proposed that primary and secondary schooling continues to be dominated by singular disciplinary knowledge, while universities are increasingly dominated by regional disciplines, and technical and further education institutes by competency based models of generic knowledge.

Again there is contestation about whether the national curriculum is past, present or future oriented, and whether particular modes of curriculum organisation give students access to valued and valuable knowledge.

### **Concluding Comments**

Curriculum development and implementation is always a contested activity. Unanimous agreement is simply not achievable given the diversity of stakeholder groups vying for input in the formation of 'official knowledge'. Official knowledge 'refers to the educational knowledge which the state constructs and distributes in educational institutions' (Bernstein, 2000: 65), and

changes in the bias and focus of this official knowledge brought about by contemporary curricula reform emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice. Thus the bias and focus of this 'official knowledge' are expected to construct in teachers and students a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration embedded in particular performances and practices (Bernstein, 2000: 65)

The papers in this Special Issue raise significant issues about the national curriculum. Given that this is a project still in the making, it is timely to add to the national conversation. We see this edition as an opportunity to ask confronting questions. What is being imagined for Australia and Australian young people in these curricular documents? The Australian Curriculum is an endeavour worthy of more rather than less curricular conversations.

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