

What Good a National Curriculum for Indigenous Students?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to question the relevance of a national curriculum to Indigenous education. If the proposed curriculum in Australia doesn't significantly contribute to bridging the achievement gap for Indigenous students or seek to acknowledge the centrality of Indigenous knowledges, histories and cultures in the core content and the spirit of the curriculum, then it is difficult to imagine any additional benefits to Indigenous and indeed non-Indigenous students than what is currently offered in each state.

The National Curriculum Board began its work in 2008 buoyed by a rare alignment of state and federal party politics. 'The Shape of the National Curriculum: A Proposal for Discussion' followed by 'Framing Papers' in English, History, Mathematics and the Sciences were published for consultation at mainly 'invitation only' forums and for general public submission within a relatively short timeframe. For Indigenous parents and community members, grass roots consultation is the cornerstone of decision-making, so this process alienated those already struggling to be heard by largely unresponsive systems. The lack of inclusion in any significant way prior to submission dates, despite 'diversity' rhetoric within the documents, has resulted in deep suspicion of the processes and their products. It also raises valid questions about the commitment of resources to yet another layer of education bureaucracy.

Further, there have been a multitude of reports around issues of Indigenous disadvantage since the beginning of this century¹. The crucial role of education in addressing this disadvantage has been consistently identified in one way or another. The role of the teacher, their relationship with students' families and how they teach is frequently cited as the key to bridging the disadvantage gap. Any mention of curriculum is a call for the deeper inclusion of Indigenous histories and cultures. The introduction of a National Curriculum has not been identified as contributing to solutions, and by the processes employed and the products created, this position appears well founded.

More recently, attempts to include Indigenous voices have been welcomed, but is it too little too late? Can truly inclusive curricular that engages Indigenous viewpoints and expands understanding and acceptance of diversity be developed after the groundwork and indeed the decision to have a national curriculum has been made?

¹*Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators (annual reports), Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commissioner's annual reports to the Australian government, NSW Parliament Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (latest - November 2008), New South Wales Department of Education and Training & New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (2004) The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyama Yaami guurulaw Yirringin.gurray - Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future Darlinghurst, Sydney, NSW- commonly known as the AER, MCEETYA Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (2006), "Connecting Cultures." Review of Victoria's Indigenous Education Strategies: Supporting Indigenous Students through School (January 2008), Mellor & Corrigan (2004)*

Introduction

The notion of a national curriculum has been hovering around various education debates for the past thirty or so years, constrained by the constitutional reality that states have responsibility for curriculum while the commonwealth holds the purse strings (Reid, 2005, p6). Recently, the national curriculum debate has found itself in previously uncharted waters where most state governments and the commonwealth are represented by the same political party resulting in agreement to implement a national curriculum in four areas as a starting point by 2011. To this end, the National Curriculum Board held its first meeting on the 23rd April 2008 and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Bill was passed on the 19th November, 2008 to establish the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (of which a national curriculum is one action) was ratified by all state education ministers on the 5th December 2008, and common assessment (NAPLAN - National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy) of students in years 3,5,7, and 9 was held for the first time across Australia in mid 2008.

The National Curriculum Board's 'The Shape of the National Curriculum: Proposal for Discussion' (2008) draws on the first draft of National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (September 2008) prepared under the auspices of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Training (MCEETYA). In this document, five major global changes were identified as significant to Australia's future and consequently, need to be reflected in a national curriculum. Briefly, these are:

- an increase in global interdependence and integration including global mobility and migration;
- the growth of nations such as China, India and the Asia - Pacific region creating a shift in geopolitical power;
- the impact of globalisation and technological change on the workforce and subsequently on compulsory education to prepare students to compete in these new conditions;
- increasingly complex environmental, social and economic pressures; and
- rapid and continual advances in information and communications technology (ICT).

The strong belief that Australia needs to upskill its future workforce through education to be viable in a globalised and increasingly competitive world is evident and clearly this is a key driver in the development of a national curriculum.

Indigenous Students

Indigenous Australians however, have not yet achieved equal outcomes in the national education setting as many reports² show, so that the imperative must be to address this serious and nationally debilitating situation if Australia is to compete internationally. MCEETYA (October 2008, p4) acknowledges this in the preamble of the second draft of the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, *First and foremost, Australia faces a crisis in its failure to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians, which remain far behind those of other*

² MCEETYA *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (2006), *Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators* (2007). *Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Quality of School Education* (2007), *NSW Parliament Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (November 2008), *NSW AER* (2004), *Connecting Cultures Review of Victoria's Education Strategies* (January 2008)

students. Addressing this gap in achievement must be our most important priority over the next decade.

This system-wide failure to provide an equitable education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is reflected in a long history of exclusion, assimilation and alienation. *The dispossession of indigenous people in the formation of Australia and the systematic denial of Indigenous knowledge and culture within education has made Indigenous Australians a particularly disadvantaged and marginalized group. Modernist public education and its nation building curriculum contributed significantly to entrenching this disadvantage.* Seddon (2001, p323)

The legacy of colonisation on Australian society and its educational institutions is that patterns of inclusion and exclusion are predetermined by what is consciously and unconsciously taught at schools (Seddon, 2001, p304). This includes not only historic and current patterns of the exclusion of Indigenous Australian students but also of the representation of Indigenous knowledges and world views in mainstream, 'collectively-accepted' curriculum. As curriculum is generally agreed to be a cultural construction involving debates about core beliefs and values, its role in the establishment and maintenance of individual and organisational centres of power (Seddon, 2001) is of particular concern to Indigenous Australians. *What counts as valued knowledge is both a consequence of socially produced selective traditions and, through its educative effects, contributes to the wider economic and cultural formation of society and culture, its patterns of power and inequality, and its dynamics of conversation and renewal.* (Williams 1976 in Seddon, 2001, p310). Harrison (2007, p.49) expands this point as he highlights the way in which teachers transmit their beliefs about Indigenous people not through curriculum but through .. *what the teacher does in what he or she says that produces a cross-cultural relation inside and outside the classroom, ..* adding another layer of entrenched Eurocentric superiority. This is usually within the context of deficiency, problems that need fixing or empathy for past tragedies thus perpetrating the inherent power relations in society that are reflected in curriculum.

In this context, it will be argued that Indigenous knowledges and world views need to be included in core concepts and beliefs within curriculum and pedagogy while concurrently providing Indigenous Australian students with unfettered access to the knowledge and power of mainstream society (Connell, 2008). The NCB proposal states that previous efforts to address inequity through alternative curriculum has failed to deliver improved outcomes; a view also expressed by Aboriginal community members in the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education³ (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p189), therefore it can be assumed that Indigenous access to the same opportunities and outcomes as non-Indigenous students is supported by the ACARA. Crucial to this, is the way in which access to this knowledge and power is achieved, not necessarily through superficial attempts such as placing a few Indigenous students in expensive private schools away from their communities, but through real, authentic and culturally appropriate changes to the way in which students are assessed or judged as equals and equally deserving of access to mainstream society's knowledge and power. This is not a new concept and was identified in the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities' (ACACA's) Guidelines for assessment quality and equity (1995, p. 1):

Fundamental to equity in assessment is the recognition that the construction of the knowledge and skills to be addressed should involve a critical evaluation of the extent to which the choice of a particular set of knowledge and skills is likely to privilege certain groups of students and exclude others by virtue of gender, socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic background. (in Klenowski, 2009, pp.82-3).

³ NSW AER (2004)

This then raises the issue of the importance of culture and identity in the development of Indigenous students' confidence in their educational efficacy resulting in key recommendations around 'Fortifying Identities of Aboriginal Students' (NSW DET & AECG, 2004, pp.195-197). Consequently, the implementation of state-wide cultural competency training for school staff in NSW is on the professional learning agenda with the recent signing of NSW Department of Education and Training Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2009-2012.

Consultation

For Indigenous people, personal and ongoing genuine communication is the only acceptable way forward. The short consultation periods set by the NCB for the initial proposal, where 'invitation only' key forums were held, is contrary to all the literature and policies around appropriate consultation and protocols⁴ for involving Indigenous people and communities. ACARA has followed this trend with a very tight timetable from curriculum writing to implementation in less than two years. In fact, there are no clearly documented procedures around consultation including how the outcomes of the various forums, discussions and other consultations will be accounted for in the curriculum products. Indigenous advisory groups are not listed at all as a stakeholder group, unless it is to be assumed that they come under parent groups⁵. ACARA initiated an Indigenous Taskforce, with the first meeting held in March 2009, to assess ways in which Indigenous perspectives can be represented in this new curriculum. And therein lies an all too common problem. Once again, Indigenous views have been sought after the decisions have been made, the framing papers have been written and the legislation passed, thus relegating these views to the periphery. This trend is articulated in a number of research papers and reports including the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (p. 16) in discourse around Indigenous education being 'bolted on' rather than 'built in' so that it becomes the domain of specialists and committed individuals rather than central to the system that serves the people. Recently (October, 2009), a 'Statement from Indigenous educators and community members on the Inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives in the Australian Curriculum', addressed to the Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations articulated these concerns in the statement: *Any framework for the development of a new Australian curriculum must be inclusive of Indigenous Australian content, knowledges and expertise, and include explicit reference across all areas of the curriculum framework. This can only occur with genuine engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and community members at all levels of the process.*

Reciprocal consultation is essential so that Indigenous voices are not just heard but actively included in debates including ongoing dialogue on what should be a community vision, not a government, technical or managerial response (Kennedy, 2008). If the process of participation and consultation is not genuine and authentic for all stakeholders including state and national Indigenous advisory groups, then it will only be superficially implemented and the vision will not be realised. Professor Reid (2005, p7) acknowledges this in a research report commissioned by the Australian government in February 2005, by stating that a national curriculum should be based on ... *a process that engages the professional community in the conceptual phases .. (and one) .. that seeks to build constituency of support.*

⁴ New South Wales Board of Studies (2008) *Working with Aboriginal Communities A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols Revised Edition 2008* BOS NSW Sydney Australia, NSW Department of Community Services (2009) *Working with Aboriginal People and Communities A Practice Resource*,

⁵ as identified on the ACARA website

The lack of acknowledgment in the proposal of the unique and distinct place Indigenous Australians and their knowledges, cultures and skills has in Australian history and contemporary life is ill conceived. It is widely accepted that Australia needs to face and accept its own past if it wishes to pursue a global identity, a view expressed by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in the Commonwealth Government's National Apology to the Stolen Generations in February 2008. In fact, the only mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture under the educational goal of 'Active and informed citizens' is within a larger point of understanding Australia's system of government, history and culture and is condescending in its tone, limited in depth and scope of the magnitude of the issues involved and tacked onto the end of a lengthy description about Australia seemingly as an afterthought. Further disappointing is the proposition that cultural sensitivity is only a perspective and not considered core content or a competency as such, despite growing trends in professional learning, and government and private sector workplace training on cultural competence and diversity management practices. Notably, Australia is generally considered to be lagging behind many OECD (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development) countries in this movement which is now acknowledged as essential for business and industry competition on a global scale (Young, 2008). For example, Indigenous employment strategies are relatively new to the Australian corporate sector, compared to institutionalised practices supported by legislation available in many OECD countries since last century.

Indigenous Content

One of the key concerns about the implementation of a National Curriculum is the potential loss of Indigenous content, in particular local Indigenous content, which is the cornerstone of NSW curriculum for instance, in the development in Aboriginal Studies, and specific content areas and perspectives in a range of subjects. Consulting with local Aboriginal communities has become integral practice for a growing number of NSW schools over the past twenty years, and successive NSW education departments have continued to develop and commit to community partnerships and Aboriginal content in the curriculum. The highly acclaimed NSW DET's Quality Teaching Framework(2003)⁶ acknowledges the importance of student connectedness to school through a challenging academic learning environment that includes students' cultural, spiritual and social knowledges and skills as significant to curriculum development, pedagogy and assessment. Utilising this framework, Indigenous education consultants across the state, in partnership with their regions, communities and schools, have further enhanced the teaching of Indigenous students and curriculum.

In fact, the inclusion of Indigenous studies was strongly supported by recommendations from the NSW Government Senate Committee on Social Issues into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (2008) which focused on identifying strategies to address the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non- Indigenous people (NSW AECG, 2008, p14). Recommendation 18 (2008, p89) states that *Comparative studies of Australian history and culture be included as a mandatory core subject within all NSW educational institutions and that sufficient teachers are trained to ensure that it is taught effectively*. The intrinsic link between improved education outcomes and improved health outcomes has now been well documented, *The Aboriginal scholar, Professor Ken Wyatt adds that every additional year of education also reduces the risk of Aboriginal infant mortality by seven to ten percent*. (NSW AECG, 2008, p14). Thus the implications for Indigenous students of

⁶ NSW Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools: Discussion Paper, A classroom practice guide and an assessment practice guide have become the cornerstone of much professional learning in NSW

curriculum and pedagogy⁷ are far more critical than for any other group of students and this needs to be acknowledged, noted and acted upon by ACARA.

What is really driving the national curriculum?

The focus of the National Curriculum proposal on countries with the fastest growing economic markets, China and India, suggests that the economic rationalist agenda is still a driving force and that the curriculum, pedagogy and the students served by this document may well not be the top priority despite rhetoric claiming otherwise (Kennedy, 2008). This is reflected in a growing national obsession with assessment and results, performance indicators, accountability and corporate style governance which in effect ... *retraditionalise(s) educational provision and reconfirm(s) inequalities*. (Seddon, 2001, p320). This not only marginalises Indigenous students and their communities but, displaces the curriculum, and pedagogy as key educational drivers (Seddon, 2001) and the teacher / student relationship as a core element in student achievement (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004). Teachers and their representative unions have been and continue to be, advocates for disadvantaged students and disempowered communities in educational debates and the paucity of consultation across the education spectrum will only weaken the final outcome, undermining the process and the final product. In fact, the overall sense of a lack of vision based on any clearly articulated educational theory, especially around what is needed to produce well rounded students with a genuine concern for social justice and the communities in which they live is of real concern. Ewing (2009) recognizes the importance of this sentiment in her comment, *The most important driver for a national curriculum should be about equity and social justice and improved learning outcomes for our most disadvantaged and isolated students*.

Generally speaking, for Indigenous people, the broader educational imperative which includes familial, land, cultural and social responsibilities and obligations, as well as the day-to-day realities of student lives (Kennedy, 2008), which constitutes a considerable element of Indigenous knowledges, needs to be accounted for within the processes and products of the National Curriculum. Connell (2009, p. 15) highlights this very point when she says: *Questions about the goals of education are questions about the direction in which we want a social order to move, given that societies cannot avoid changing. This is where questions of privilege and social justice in education arise; they are fundamental to the project, not add-ons*.

The National Curriculum has also been driven by Australian results in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). Recent results highlight that Australia's top achievers have fallen behind from 2000 and 2003 to 2006 (NCB, 2008, p6). It is now feared that desperately needed resources for poorly achieving students will be redirected towards improving the higher end rather than increasing resources to improve achievement at all levels. For Indigenous students who are over-represented in the lower bands, there is also a growing concern around underachievement in mid-range students and the difficulty in getting these students into the upper achievement bands, which can also be a product of poor academic self efficacy and an expectation of failure. Thus the issues are complex and the narrow focus on assessment, outcomes, and test results which are often culturally biased products, do not serve Indigenous and other minority groups well.

The design of a national curriculum should not just be about correcting a deficit (Kennedy, 2008), as the concern with PISA and other results indicate, but about a vision that is inclusive of all

⁷ SIPA (Systematic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement) Study – links quality teaching to student outcomes with particular implications for Aboriginal students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds - Griffiths, T., Amosa W., Ladwig, J., & Gore, Jennifer. (2007). 'Equity and Pedagogy: familiar patterns and QT possibilities.' Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference 25-29 November 2007

peoples with acknowledgment of the unique and central place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures hold in Australian culture and identity. This vision needs to be consulted about at length, engaging all stakeholders, in particular actively engaging and empowering those least heard in these debates; a grass roots vision that is built from the ground up not the top down if it is to be truly representative. It also needs to ... *focus first and foremost on the values and purpose base, and the conceptual framework for the education we want for Australian children...* (Hanlon, 2004,p5 in Ewing).

Is a national curriculum necessary?

The National Curriculum Proposal is more like a series of observations, ideas and statements about curriculum and how it should be constructed to ensure the success of Australian students in an ever competitive globalised education and work environment as currently measured by PISA. This of course, is an outcome that every parent would want for their child, but it shouldn't be at the expense of engaging students in a curriculum that articulates a range of perspectives and experiences and critiques the very society within which we live. Perhaps all that is really needed is a realignment of sorts between various states rather than creating another level of bureaucracy further distancing students, parents, teachers and the community from the key decision making processes around what is taught and how. Certainly, states and territories have invested heavily in the development and implementation of their curriculum and are, by enlarge, loath to let go of this or reinvent the wheel. It is also naive to think that the current alignment of party politics will allow for the smooth introduction of a national curriculum as education is constitutionally still the responsibility of states. As Allum (2009, p.5) eloquently comments: *The players in all this are political beings, and the result is that they will, by necessity, be forced into compromise as they design the structure and content of the curriculum - and political compromise will never result in educational excellence.*

The lack of foundation grounded in what Reid (2005, p6) refers to as ... *a theorized and articulated view of curriculum, (and) a strong research and conceptual base...* including what makes us Australian, what curriculum and knowledge traditions should be continued and what new ones should be introduced to ensure confidence in our collective identity and subsequently, ability to participate as global citizens, is distinct in its absence in the National Curriculum Proposal. This is supported by Professor Kennedy, currently Head of the Department Curriculum and Instruction at Hong Kong's Institute of Education, in his address at the University of Sydney's National Curriculum Symposium (December, 2008) when he says "*It is one thing to produce a national curriculum. It is another, neither technician nor managerial in character, to capture the soul of a nation.* Superficial attempts are made through the identification of three key attributes all students should have; 'successful learners, confident individuals and active and informed citizens'; all of which reinforce the neo-liberal obsession (Connell, 2008, p5) with promoting the individual above the collective. There is little sense of the central role of education and knowledge in creating a fair and just society where individuals are only as good as the collectives or communities they are members of in the face of potentially more divisive global changes.

Concluding Remarks

So perhaps the National Curriculum is emerging from an imprudent standpoint; potentially one that could increase the gap between the rich and the poor causing further societal dysfunction and individual and group marginalisation. Perhaps the National Curriculum should embrace notions of community responsibilities and obligations, applying Indigenous approaches to family, kin and community support, sustainable land management practices based on something stronger than

economic need or physical survival, equality within cultural and social structures; and consensus decision making based on authentic and genuine consultation. Professor Kennedy (December, 2008) also warns against a 'one size fits all' approach, a conclusion reached after fifteen years of consultation on a national curriculum in Hong Kong. All community members, including Indigenous communities, need to be included in dialogue around managing common purpose and pluralism, and commonality and diversity which are central to the evolution of a curriculum.

Finally, if the National Curriculum proposal is weak in these key areas, the curriculum for each of the subject areas that follow will be hindered by this, with a greater potential for the 'watering down' of those knowledges, understandings, skills and issues not considered as essential learning. Further, *A national curriculum is not necessarily an excellent curriculum, especially if developed with little consultation or funding and on an unrealistic timeframe.* (Allum, 2009, p.6). Unfortunately, it appears to be only the glaringly poor performance of Indigenous Australian students as a statistical entity that prompts any response to these types of discussions, rather than a sense of social justice, 'a fair go' and what is morally and ethically the right thing to do.

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