

~~~~~THE POLITICS OF AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION:

A CORPORATE CURRICULUM?

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INTRODUCTION

The curriculum of schools has not been immune from the flurry of activity that has characterised State-Federal relationships in education during the third and fourth Hawke Labor governments. Much of this activity has been generated by the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training in his pursuit of a program of micro-economic reform directly related to education and training. It is in this context that discussion of a uniform curriculum for all Australian schools has gathered momentum in recent years. Yet there are inherent problems in proposing such uniformity in a Federal system of government in which the States and Territories have traditionally guarded their rights in the area of school level education. Even the relatively harmless efforts of the former Curriculum Development Centre have run into barrages of flak from State governments when it has seemed that for some reason or other States' rights have been infringed. Can it be seriously argued that in Australia in the 1990's we are facing the prospect of a corporatised curriculum designed to be implemented in all Australian schools?

There are two reasons for reacting positively to this question. In the past two years a well articulated philosophical argument has been advanced as the basis for a more uniform approach to curriculum provision. What is more, that argument has been listened to seriously by all Australian Ministers for Education who have responsibility for curriculum policy in each State and Territory. It could well be argued that Australia is closer to a corporate curriculum than it ever has been.

In this paper, I shall attempt to outline both the philosophy underlying current efforts at national curriculum policy development and the processes that are being used to try and influence the curriculum of schools. I shall argue that while the general philosophical directions are clear, there is considerable doubt about the extent to which Australia can expect a uniform national curriculum in the 1990's.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIRECTIONS OF CURRICULUM POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

There is little doubt that the driving force behind shaping a new philosophical agenda for the curriculum of Australian schools is the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training. His objectives were made very clear soon after he took office when he issued Skills for Australia (Dawkins, 1987) :

A high quality basic education is an essential prerequisite for a vocationally skilled and adaptable labour force. More needs to be known about the levels of competence achieved by our students at school, especially in the core disciplines of language, mathematics and science...We also need to examine new ways to impart less measurable skills on which future prosperity depends - life-time learning, enterprise and initiative, pursuit of excellence, communication skills, team work and responsibility. In other words, we need to lay the foundations of a productive culture.

(pp.8-9)

This position was reiterated in a subsequent publication, *Strengthening Australia's Schools*, that focussed more directly on policy directions relating to curriculum and schools. Schooling was portrayed as central to the process of economic and social adjustment being pursued by the government (Dawkins, 1988) :

Schools are the starting point of an integrated education and training structure in the economy. They provide the foundation on which a well-informed, compassionate and cohesive society is built. They also form the basis of a more highly skilled, adaptive and productive workforce. As skill upgrading and retraining of adults becomes more necessary, so will the quality and nature of schooling received by individuals need to change. It will need to be more adaptable and prepare for lifelong education. We need to ensure that every young Australian gets a general education of quality which provides both personal and intellectual development as well as broadly based and adaptable skills.  
(p.2)

This is the platform on which efforts to reform the school curriculum were built from mid-1988 onwards. It is important because it publicly signed a change of philosophical direction in the Commonwealth's approach to schooling and the curriculum. It is more openly instrumental with strong managerial perspectives compared to the more humanistic/progressive approaches of previous governments. Yet it is not altogether new-it has been possible to identify a growing instrumentalism in curriculum policy during the first and second Hawke governments when Senator Susan Ryan was the Commonwealth Minister for Education (Kennedy, 1990). The difference is, that under Minister Dawkins instrumentalism has become the driving force for curriculum reform in Australian schools.

#### PROCESSES FOR ACHIEVING A CORPORATE CURRICULUM IN AUSTRALIA

I have indicated elsewhere how the Commonwealth has often aspired to the development of a more focussed curriculum policy but until recently has never quite made it (Kennedy, 1990). The Australian Education Council (AEC), the regular meeting of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Education, was often considered as a favoured forum to achieve such an objective and indeed Senator Susan Ryan used it for this purpose from 1986 onwards. By 1988, however, the outcomes were still somewhat insignificant. Nevertheless, the AEC also became the forum for the new Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training when in July 1988 he called a Special Meeting of Ministers to consider the agenda he had set out in *Strengthening Australia's Schools*. From that time onwards, the AEC has been the vehicle for achieving national curriculum policy objectives and it is from that forum that any corporate curriculum will emerge.

Almost two and a half years down the track what has been achieved ?

- Mapping exercises of the States' and Territories' general curriculum policies and mathematics curricula were completed by the end of 1988.
- A draft statement, *A National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools*, was completed in mid-1990 and was considered by a national consultative meeting in October 1990. Additional changes have been included as a result of the consultation and plans are now being made for its publication.
- Additional mapping exercises are underway in Literacy, Science and Technology and are expected to be completed by the end of 1990. At that time national

statements similar to A National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools are being contemplated for each curriculum area.

- Mapping exercises of Human Society, Environmental Studies and Aboriginal Studies are also in progress, but are not expected to be completed until 1991.

This is a considerable array of activity but to date only one concrete outcome has emerged, A National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools. Is this a portent of a corporate curriculum? Will this be implemented in every mathematics classroom in Australia? Does it represent the shape of things to come in each of the other curriculum areas that is being mapped?

While it is clear that the document will be published in one form or another it is not quite so clear what will happen to it after that. For example, in a report from the Project Steering Committee the following points were made (Eltis, 1990 ):

"...the document will be used as a reference point for reviewing curriculum advice on school Mathematics."(p.4)

"(there was) recognition that the primary audience for the Professional Development will be those responsible at School System and Regional level for providing curriculum development and advice, and support for schools". (p.5).

"(there was) agreement that each school system should provide a statement to accompany the professional Document linking it to advice currently provided in school mathematics, intended directions within that school system, professional development programs for teachers and procedures for assessing students' learning"(p.5).

This does not sound like an implementation strategy that will see every school in Australia dropping its existing mathematics curriculum and adopting the National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools. It seems that the document will be used as an adjunct to existing curricula rather than as a substitute for them. Such a view was expressed by the New South Wales Director of Curriculum at a national seminar held in Melbourne (Eltis, 1989):

It would be possible for systems to decide to develop national guidelines for particular areas of the curriculum based on current practice (as described in further mapping exercises), recent research and theory, and these guidelines could then be used as reference points for systems as they develop their own curriculum documents. In this process the search for quality would take on a new dimension in Australian education. (p.9)

This seems like exactly the fate of the National Statement on Mathematics for Australian Schools. If this is correct, it is by no means a corporate curriculum although it may certainly have a corporatising effect. The potential is certainly there for such a statement to exert a significant influence but it will not happen without the consent of education system authorities or without the assent of teachers and school communities. This is a considerable modifying influence on any attempt at a corporate curriculum for Australian schools.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR NATIONAL CURRICULUM POLICY EFFORTS

Given the somewhat moderate national curriculum statement that has emerged from two years of concerted effort, what might the future hold? Are we in for more of the same or are yet new directions being contemplated ? Recent statements by

the Commonwealth Minister seem to suggest the latter.

At the Special Premiers Conference held recently in Brisbane, the Premiers rejected a package put forward by the Commonwealth. The package would have provided them with more flexibility in the way they spent Commonwealth funds for schools in return for agreement on uniform education standards. Mr Dawkins struck back vehemently (The Courier Mail, 2 November 1990):

It should be patently clear to any disinterested observer that our school systems are in crisis...When one looks at some of the glaring inconsistencies operating across our eight State and territory education systems of education, the Premiers' refusal to address the issue of national education standards is astonishing...Even matters as simple as standardising school starting ages and handwriting styles were put in the too hard basket (at the Premiers' Conference). Trucks, trains, food and buildings got the thumbs up for cooperation, but co-operation on achieving more sensible and consistent arrangements for three million schoolchildren was not deemed by (the) Premiers as a high priority.

This outburst by Mr Dawkins is not only an indication of his own commitment to uniform national standards in education but perhaps more importantly an indication that the AEC process that has been used to date has been too slow in yielding the desired results. The exact package sent to the Premiers' Conference has not been made public but it would certainly make interesting reading. A corporate curriculum of another kind may well be in the making. If so, it will make its presence felt at the next AEC meeting which is to be held in early December.

One possible element of any renewed attempt at a national curriculum was referred to in an editorial earlier in the year (Canberra Times, 3 June 1990 ):

A corollary of a uniform core curriculum is a uniform system of testing students' skills.

This has never been an overt Commonwealth objective although one of the objectives set out in Strengthening Australia's Schools was the development of 'a more common approach to assessment'. At the same time one of the Working Parties that emerged from the Special Meeting of Ministers in July 1988 was charged with the task of examining issues relating to basic skills testing and programme evaluation (Kennedy, 1989). Piper (1989) has reported that the Working Party came up with a recommendation on the development of subject profiles but that this has not been accepted by the AEC. Nevertheless it needs to be asked whether a more comprehensive approach to a uniform national curriculum would also include national skills testing - I do not believe that the issue is totally off the political agenda although it is difficult to see how it could ever be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

I believe the future will see increased efforts placed on corporatising the school curriculum in the name of national education standards. I do not think that efforts to date have succeeded in the way that was originally planned by the Commonwealth. The mapping exercises have provided a circuitous process that to date has ended up demonstrating more commonality than differences across systems. Perhaps this is exactly what State bureaucrats intended ? At the same

time the assessment issue has been simmering beneath the surface but perhaps it is the real issue. National assessment would ensure a national curriculum - perhaps this will be the next step to be taken in what is becoming a drawn out and unproductive exercise on the part of the AEC.

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