

Colleagues

Please find below some initial thoughts regarding epistemology and the national curriculum:

1. Public schooling in Australia is the responsibility of states and territories. Within Victoria and the Education Act, public schools are governed by elected school councils that set the educational direction for the school and are legal entities in their own right. The curriculum of a school is approved by the school council on the advice of the principal and staff. As a federation, the Australian Government cannot direct the curriculum of schools, although over recent years in order to secure additional funding, the states and territories have entered into agreements with the federal government regarding educational programs. (Similar to the debate on hospital funding at the moment.) The federal nature of education can be seen at the Y11/12 level where the states and territories have statutory authorities that conduct those programs. This is also the case at P-10 eg VCAA and VELS, but there is greater scope here for 'agreement' between Canberra and Spring Street. A national curriculum therefore cannot be imposed on states and territories.

2. It appears that the basic design feature of the draft curriculum to date is that of disciplinary knowledge. It could also be that maths, science, history and English are seen as being easier to test, but these four areas would be considered as disciplines, within a small number of disciplines overall and seems to be too co-incidental to be co-incidental. (Physics and chemistry are generally seen as the disciplines within science rather than science itself.) While some philosophers of education have argued the existence of a small number of knowledge disciplines, they generally do not support the notion that the school curriculum should automatically also consist of a small number of discipline subjects. It is up to the profession and schools to design a curriculum that best supports student learning as distinct from the imposition of predetermined knowledge from the disciplines. It is a weakness of the profession that this has not been developed over the decades, if not from 1872 when the first Education Act was proclaimed, then from 1945 following World War II and the expansion of education.

Note. A side-effect of this point is the place of religion in schools. For some, religion can be included as a discipline, or in philosophy if philosophy is a discipline. For others, this is a back-door way of including religion in public schools and a justification for private and church schooling. It is interesting that the issue of religion has been raised in the context of the national curriculum (Radio National, 7/04), but from an ideological rather than disciplinary position. This may yet happen.

3. The draft national curriculum is clearly content-driven. This is for political reasons, but it also reflects a view of the purpose of schooling ie to pass on predetermined content to children, which can then be assessed in relation to 'achievement standards.' The history draft has been compiled to ensure certain content for example and is very content-heavy. A view of schooling that concentrates on the learning of children, on cognitive growth, would not be written this way. A view of curriculum that emphasises a philosophical investigation of knowledge would not be written this way. A view of teaching that encourages groups of learners negotiating and constructing their own views of the world in relation to similar and contrary viewpoints would not be written this way. This conservative view of schooling and knowledge does not respect the background, culture and experience of children as the prime avenue into learning, but supports the imposition of specified information in small chunks that can be repeated as assessment.

4. Each of the four content areas outline general issues that go across their areas and which link areas. In maths for example, proficiency strands involve reasoning, problem solving, fluency and understanding. In science, there is science understanding, science as human endeavour and science inquiry. The cross-curriculum dimensions are identified as

Indigenous history and culture, sustainability and Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia. Various curriculum design in the past has also attempted this approach, but within a context of content, the latter usually dominates. It is possible to search the outline to pick up where all of these different threads are mentioned, but these usually are expressed in content rather than concept and process terms. While it is the professional right of teachers to work with their students to meet learning needs, it is to be expected that an emphasis on content will swamp giving attention to complicated cross-curriculum learning issues. Again, this is a design issue: either the profession accepts that Australian schooling is primarily about the delivery of content, or a curriculum is really about cognitive growth for each child.

5. A key issue for the national curriculum is that of grammar. According to the Deputy Prime Minister, 'The grammar wars are over; phonics is back,' and 'If you oppose testing, you support happy illiterates.' (One can only assume that such a disgraceful, anti-educational, anti-teacher and anti-student stance has been drawn from New York and Joel Klein.) How the profession views the grammar question - that goes across all areas - reflects its view of humanity, the purpose of schooling and how learning occurs. Professor McGaw said many months ago that a 'massive' pd program was required especially in relation to grammar. It must be said that the statement on grammar in the English outline, is reasonable and will allow a broader approach being adopted. However the glossary prepared is extremely traditional and narrow. It is highly unlikely that the pd program on grammar will feature a progressive view of language acquisition involving Chomsky, psycholinguistics, cognitive science and neuroscience. It is unlikely to support a view of language as experience. It is extremely important that the profession advocate a progressive, experiential approach to language, literacy and grammar, at the very least to sit alongside conservative, narrow and inappropriate world views. (For a discussion of this position see Grammar 1-8 previously circulated.)

Overall, the stated rationale for a national curriculum is weak within Australian federalism. Currently, the draft is content-driven and lacks an epistemological framework. The balance between content and a progressive epistemology should be redressed to be more inclusive of the child's culture, history, language, community and experience. Cross-curriculum issues and indeed cross-curriculum learning needs further development. The issue of grammar (and phonics according to DPM Gillard and Chancellor Klein) as the key idea that goes across all content areas, must be rigorously critiqued. Questions related to testing need to be pursued in relation to NAPLAN, My School etc. A national curriculum needs to be considered and critiqued by the profession as a guide and support for its work, not as an imposed structure for testing and accountability within a neoliberal economy.

Regards
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