

National curriculum: Consigning future generations to religious illiteracy?

Most Australians agree that a national school curriculum is a good idea and needs to be pursued. But curriculum, like other areas of life, is complicated by the myriad of different perspectives and expectations that characterise the Australian community. The torrent of criticism on the recent draft, including from state curriculum authorities, highlights that curriculum development is highly political and needs to be inclusive of a variety of world-views.

Last week, in an article in a national newspaper, the view was forcefully expressed that the national curriculum had few references to religion and, in particular, none to the contribution that Christianity had made to world and Australian history. While accusations were made about the secularisation of the curriculum and its exclusiveness, the writer did not seem to appreciate that such developments were merely a further move along a continuum to religious illiteracy that has been occurring in Australian schools for decades.

In NSW, the Education Act 1990 requires education to be *secular* but defines secular as *including general religious education (GRE)*. Research indicates that, based on a legal precedence, GRE is non-denominational Christianity. However, the NSW Department of Education and Training with the agreement of the churches and representatives of other religious organisations has carried the definition of GRE as *teaching about the world's major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives*. This has been a non-controversial definition as only a small number in the community would disagree that students learning generally about religion is part of their cultural heritage and necessary to understand history and the world in which we currently live.

In the early 1990, the newly formed NSW Board of Studies had difficulty responding to the GRE requirement in the Act. Senior officers preferred to think that it was a problem specific to government schools like "scripture" (Special Religious Education) the other form of religious education prescribed in the Act. GRE became an issue in the final draft of the Kindergarten to Year 6 Human Society and Its Environment draft syllabus where at the last minute representatives of religious groups in the community were invited to make GRE additions to the syllabus. As a result, NSW primary school students learn about other religions, religious celebrations in Australia and about people's motivation for their contributions to our world and to Australian society. When revising the Years 7-10 curriculum in the early 2000s and as part of a curriculum mapping exercise, Board officers were asked to map GRE across this curriculum. This did not occur and the place of GRE in the secondary curriculum is at best unidentified and uncertain.

It is not therefore surprising that one of the criticisms of the national curriculum is its lack of inclusion of religion and, in particular, the contribution that Christianity has made to western civilisation including the development of Australia. Yes, many know about some of the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity and other religions and some of these should rightly find

their way into the curriculum. But is this a balanced or fair view of the impact of religion on world and Australian history or on our current society here and in other places? Don't students have a right to make their own assessment of such matters?

Some of the questions that need to be asked are: Who is writing the national curriculum and what are their world-views? Who is supervising and reviewing their work and what are their world-views? I don't subscribe to the view that the pen is being held in the hands of secularists who are deliberately expunging religion from the national curriculum. It is more likely that they have themselves relied on Australian history written by some highly regarded historians who have deliberately ignored religious influences, been a product of a school curriculum that has ignored the role of religion, used textbooks that ignore religious influences and who may themselves have superficial knowledge of the major world religions.

So what should be done? There needs to be recognition of the problem and a willingness to address it. Currently denial is the mode and *lets tough it out* the attitude. This is not satisfactory because it destines future generations of Australians to religious illiteracy. A situation where they fail to understand the impact, both positive and negative, of religion on culture and history and develop distorted world-views that display cultural ignorance.

Having acknowledged the problem and a preparedness to address it, explicit references to key ideas, developments and historical events need to be included in the curriculum. Without this explicitness (but not excessive detail) teachers, like the curriculum writers, will continue in their past practice and students will not develop religious literacy. Leaving such matters to textbook writers would be equally undesirable. The community deserves a curriculum guarantee on this matter and only greater explicitness can achieve this.

These comments are not about restoring religion to the curriculum, but are about recognising fairly and impartially its contribution (warts and all) to history and its continuing influence in the world. This is core knowledge for any citizen in a global society and certainly worthy of inclusion in an Australian national school curriculum. By omitting GRE from the curriculum, secularisation is occurring by exclusion.

Finding the truth in curriculum writing is never easy, but it will not be found in distorting the curriculum to favour a particular worldview be it Christian, secular or other. While the truth has never been a matter of consensus, inclusiveness and honesty should be the goals of curriculum managers and writers. In relation to the national school curriculum and general religious education neither of these qualities feature.

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