

National Curriculum: Analysis and comment

The new National Curriculum documents for English, mathematics, science and history are now available for consultation at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Home> where comments can be registered. For Christians, the nature and content of the curriculum is very important. We believe that God can be discovered through all the curriculum subjects and that the rigorous pursuit of truth can only reveal the one who creates and sustains the universe. As human history and current communities are explored, Christians believe that how God has worked, and continues to work, in this world will be revealed. They would also want to see that the influence of Christian beliefs and the actions of Christians that have moulded history and our current societies are recognised. For these reasons, Christians want a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum. Do the current proposals meet these criteria?

In the following analysis publically aired criticisms of the proposals are considered and commented on from a personal Christian perspective.

Overall comments

1. A step backwards for NSW?

Since 1990, the NSW curriculum has been entirely in the hands of the NSW Board of Studies. It has developed curriculum documents (syllabuses) for both primary and secondary schools and these documents are notable in their explicitness about content to be taught.

In other states and territories, curriculum documents have not been as detailed and teachers have often sought help to know exactly what to teach by referring to the NSW syllabuses. It is therefore not surprising that the new national curriculum documents are a lot like the NSW documents, especially the history curriculum. However, the detail and explicitness of the current NSW curriculum is not part of these new statements.

While some have commented that the national statements are more challenging than the NSW syllabuses, the different format will not provide the level of detail that many teachers are use to. Some will like this and see the opportunities to be innovative and to introduce more relevant examples, while others will be stretched to make the curriculum alive for students. It is here that the lack of commitment to professional development could mean a very uneven implementation based on the quality of teaching and not the quality of the curriculum. For years the NSW Board of Studies syllabuses have provided a curriculum guarantee to all students. This guarantee is not as strong in the proposed national curriculum.

Given that these new curriculum documents will be accepted by state governments, what will be the role of the NSW Board of Studies in the future for K-10 curriculum? Will the Board write NSW documents based on the national curriculum or will the national curriculum become the teaching document thus leaving it up to the textbook writers to detail the content and giving them more control over the implemented curriculum?

2. Ideologically driven?

A number of education and political commentators have labelled the proposed curriculum as being ideologically driven by the current government. It should be remembered that every curriculum document is ideologically driven and much has been written about how much driving has been done by state and

federal governments and by various sectors within the education community. NSW syllabuses have been the subject of broad community consultation and this proposal for a national curriculum is subject to similar processes of consultation. There is a well founded view that consultation is often for the sake of consultation so that the real drivers of a new curriculum can continue to pursue their directions with the added confirmation that consultation has occurred. Only where there is unanimous concern over an aspect of the curriculum is any change likely to be seen. The fact that different groups take up opposing positions is always seen by authors as confirmation of having the balance about right.

In this respect, the Government of the day can usually have its way providing it has briefed the writers and their managers correctly. The national curriculum is no different, but it should be realised that the final document is always one that tries to accommodate disparate views while still following its ideological intent. During the time of the Howard Government programs like Discovering Democracy, National History Project and values education initiatives were all influenced by the ideology of the government. It was always the skill of the bureaucrats, especially at the state level, to turn the program into something that was more broadly acceptable to the ideology of the state government and the expectations of teachers and the community.

While the national curriculum might be ideologically driven it is also subject to many checks and balances, but all documents reflect one or more ideologies.

3. Many teachers won't be able to teach it?

Across all states and territories there are many excellent teachers who are creative and innovative in their teaching. These teachers do not rely on detailed curriculum documents or textbooks for their lessons. They will accept this new curriculum, and the challenges it brings, and continue to teach effectively.

For other teachers, uncertainty will exist about the content, especially in science where there is already clear evidence that in primary schools science is not taught well, if at all, in some cases. Similar concerns have been expressed about mathematics especially in relation to moving away from "skill-drill" methodology.

As indicated earlier, the textbook writers could have a major role to play in deciding the actual curriculum taught in classrooms and if they give teachers what they want and feel comfortable with, rather than embracing change and helping teachers move forward, there is a lot to be lost. But this is not a new situation, just one where for NSW the textbook writers will have less explicit guidance than before.

While the Commonwealth Government continues to say that there will not be teacher development funds provided, the sheer enormity of this exercise will demand such funds if implementation is to be successful and the community (voters) convinced that it was all worthwhile.

4. Politically correct?

What is political correctness? Is it about over zealousness in affirmative action programs? Is it upholding the rights, dignity and worth of individuals,

institutions and communities? Is it a tag to belittle views you don't agree with? Perhaps it can be all of these.

Criticism of the national curriculum has focused on the "political correctness" of Aboriginal history and in particular acknowledgement of massacres, displacement and decimation of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures. One would have thought that these curriculum battles had been fought and won in the 1990s, but apparently there are still people who can not accept that Aboriginal history, and from an Aboriginal perspective, ought to be taught when teaching the history of Australia.

Coupled with this criticism has been the lack of attention to Britain and British occupation of Australia and the greater focus on Asia. Given the current geographical, economic and community links of Australia in the world, anything other than a strong focus on Australia and Asia would appear to be a head in the sand approach to the future. There will always be those who nostalgically yearn for a past white and British Australia, but that is neither the current reality of Australia nor its future.

5. Religious content?

In this matter there is good news and bad news. The good news is that there are many opportunities to explore beliefs in history and a few in English. There are also many opportunities to consider values, ethical issues and attitudes. Christian teachers can do much with these opportunities. However, there are few explicit references to students needing to explore or know about the beliefs of others and how these beliefs affected the lives of others and of development of nations. The following table makes this clear in a simplistic but relevant way by looking at the occurrence of key words.

Search word	Eng	Maths	Sci	Hist
Religion	-	-	-	5
Religious	-	-	-	1
Christian/ ..ity/ dom	-	-	-	2
church	-	-	-	1
Islam	-	-	-	2
Judaism	-	-	-	1
Belief(s)	2	1	-	2
Values	8	1	1	8
Ethic(s)/ethical	8	10	9	8
Attitude(s)	8	-	-	8

One of the more curious features is the focus on "ethics" and "ethical", especially in mathematics and science, given that there is no mention or focus on the beliefs that underpin ethical behaviour. What is considered to be ethical behaviour and how do you judge it is a most useful question that seems to be ignored. Content does not necessarily require a study of ethics, but of the beliefs that have been historically implanted into law, constitutions and social protocols. In this regard, history is carrying too great a burden of exploring such matters.

The different subject writers do not seem to have similar concepts of values, beliefs, attitudes and ethics, how these terms should be used in the curriculum and how these matters should be treated through subject matter.

The battle for the more explicit acknowledgement of the religious beliefs that underpin Australian law, institutions and society is unlikely to be won at this level of specification. It will be an implementation, especially textbook issue. But Christians will need to be aware that unless there is explicit mention of these matters somewhere, the intention of the curriculum is to downplay them in favour of a more secular recognition. This approach actually denies students the truth about their cultural heritage. (Alex Mills will need to work even harder to get explicitness about these matters into the textbooks if the curriculum references are not apparent.)

The subjects

English

Criticism of the English curriculum has centred on its structure and how easy it will be for NSW teachers to read and interpret. Some have said that the NSW Board of Studies syllabuses are more holistic and friendlier, whereas the national curriculum has distinct strands of language, literacy and literature. While welcoming the addition of literature to upper primary, the trade off with secondary to increase grammar and phonics-led spelling has many secondary teachers believing that it has dumbed-down the curriculum with less emphasis on critical thinking.

One of the interesting features of *My School* has been to examine the areas where some schools are underperforming compared with other measures in their own results and with similar schools. While this website might have its limitations, it still provides valuable information about the strengths and weaknesses of schools. For example, it is easy to pick up those schools that are still not teaching grammar effectively.

Mathematics

Many commentators have hailed the national curriculum as an improvement for mathematics. However, in NSW some teachers are concerned that the differentiated courses in Years 9 and 10 will be lost and that in these years the curriculum will not be challenging enough for the brightest students.

Of greater concern is the desire of many mathematics teachers to move teaching away from the “skills drill” approach to more problem-solving and reasoning. While this curriculum provides that opportunity, the teaching skills of mathematics teachers in both primary and secondary will need to be improved for this change to become a reality. Again, the need for professional development funds to change teacher practice is recognised.

For a long time, much of the curriculum and teaching of mathematics has been too detached from contexts in the real world. The greater focus on problem solving methods will need to be accompanied by real world contexts and in this regard financial literacy needs greater and more explicit inclusion within the curriculum. Only in the early years of schooling is money a content focus.

Science

Science has generated considerable debate with the academics criticising the curriculum as being conservative, old fashioned and unexciting for students. Some teachers have countered with the view that the excitement comes from teachers in how they implement the curriculum. If this is so, then there will need to be massive professional development support particularly for primary teachers where science has been documented as being poorly taught.

NSW teachers may find that the content is reduced which will provide some relief. The emphasis on applications of science and implications will make study more interesting, but teachers will need to know more to teach this well.

The issue about the teaching of evolution remains a non-event. Students have to know the science, they do not have to believe it. Those Christian schools that feel compelled to avoid, or water down, the teaching of evolution, are really not acting in a very loving way towards their students who need to know this area of the curriculum just as well as any other so as not to be disadvantaged in competitive examinations. They don't have to believe it, just know it well. There are plenty of things in other subjects that have to be learnt which are not believed by Christians, including beliefs of other religions.

History

History has a history of being the most contested part of the curriculum. Yet amongst teachers there seems to be acceptance of this document. For NSW such acceptance is easy because the proposed curriculum follows closely the NSW model of history through the K-6 HSIE Syllabus and the Years 7-10 History Syllabus. Its general acceptance by other states is more surprising. So far, criticism has been led by politicians with comments about "black-arm band" history, the omission of Britain and downplaying of British occupation. These matters are discussed above in 4. *Political correctness?* I rather liked Julia Gillard's comment *It is neither black armband nor white blindfold*.

Nonetheless there are some matters of concern. The content remains very large and well beyond the current provision of time in secondary schools for History. The Board of Studies rules regarding the Years 7-10 curriculum will need to be considered. No core subject will want to give up time and pressure will be placed on the elective patterns of schools especially where three electives are offered. This arrangement will no longer be viable as the additional demands of the national curriculum become apparent. The school level debate about which subjects should have what time allocations can be very nasty. Christians will need to play a role in asserting the importance of all subjects and seeing that there is a fair allocation so that some subjects are not forced off the timetable. In this regard many will be anxious to see the full national curriculum both in regards to the subjects included and the amount of content to be covered. This looks like being the big issue for schools and school systems in the years to come.

For Christians, the history curriculum remains an opportunity to teach about what Christians believe who have influenced history. While permissible under the national curriculum the lack of explicitness means that only Christians will probably give such acknowledgements and provide students with the level of understanding that comes from recognising the beliefs that motivate people and underpin much of our law and institutions. For other students, their teachers and the future community, religious illiteracy will become the norm.

Final comment

Rigour and comprehensiveness would allow Christians to give approval of the national curriculum, but not without a further attempt to save future Australians from the ignorance that comes from religious illiteracy.

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