



Crossing the Line

Publish Date:

August 2015

Australia's National Curriculum is a political exercise, write Hannah Pandel and Stephanie Forrest

In his book *People Puzzle*, sociologist Morris Massey outlined a values development spectrum in which a person's core beliefs and values are developed during three distinct periods of their life.

The first stage is between the age of zero and seven, and is known as the 'Imprint Period'. We blindly accept everything around us is almost entirely true, especially when it comes from our parents. The second stage—the Modelling Period—is between the ages of eight and thirteen, when we continue to copy others but rather than blindly accepting their values, we try them on to see how they feel. It is at this stage that we are most impressed by religion and teachers. The final period occurs between the ages of thirteen to twenty-one, the 'Socialisation Period'. Here, we are largely influenced by our peers, our schools and the media, turning to those around us whose values resonate with our own.

According to Massey, almost the entire crucial period in which a person's values are formed,



developed, and cemented occurs when a child is at school. So when education in schools becomes less about learning the basics—reading, writing, numeracy, critical thinking—and more about instilling values, there is cause for concern.

Looking at the federally mandated Australian National Curriculum, it is clear that most of the content is moulded to fit a certain political agenda. And by far the most concerning aspect of the National Curriculum is the controversial, government mandated ‘cross-curriculum priorities’.

On the surface, the cross curriculum priorities appear harmless. Yet they promote a one-sided view of current affairs that is not universally accepted by all Australians. Furthermore, they are pushed upon children at a point in their lives where, according to Massey, they are at their most vulnerable.

If many children gain most of their understanding of society, environment, and politics in general from school—through the cross-curriculum priorities—then they could leave a powerful and potentially dangerous impact on future generations.

The ‘priorities’ are key themes that must be embedded in every learning area and year level of the curriculum. They are: ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures’, ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’, and ‘Sustainability’.

If there is any aspect of Australia’s National Curriculum that proves it is a political exercise, it is these three priorities. They clearly reflect the values of the authors of the National Curriculum. They do not reflect the values of every school in Australia. And they certainly do not reflect the values of every parent in Australia.

The first priority, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures’, concerns ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ unique sense of identity’ and is ‘approached through the interconnected aspects of Country/ Place, People and Culture’. It emerges in virtually all parts of the curriculum.

The curriculum suggests that in the Foundation Year for Mathematics, for example, students use ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methods of adding, including spatial patterns and reasoning’. In Year 4, it suggests that students study the symmetry in Aboriginal rock carvings.

Likewise, the Year 8 Business and Economics curriculum includes content on ‘the traditional markets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their participation in contemporary markets’. And in a spectacular example, though each year of the Drama curriculum fails to mention Shakespeare—only the most influential playwright of the English language—they do include at least one core ‘content description’ on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drama.

The effect of this priority is that key knowledge is crowded out and schools are required to teach ‘content’ that may be irrelevant to the subject area.

The second priority, ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’ aims to reflect ‘Australia’s extensive engagement with Asia in social, cultural, political and economic spheres’, build



‘understanding of the diversity of cultures and peoples living within Australia’, and foster ‘social inclusion and cohesion’.

This priority is similarly superficial in its nature and detracts from key curriculum content.

In the Year 8 History curriculum—which deals with the medieval and early modern periods—it is mandatory for students to take a unit on one Asian civilisation throughout the period. They have to choose between the Angkor/Khmer Empire, Japan under the Shoguns, or Polynesian expansion across the Pacific.

Yet so far as Australia’s political heritage is concerned, the Year 8 curriculum contains absolutely no mention of two of the most important events of that period, namely the Battle of Hastings and Magna Carta. The significance of these absences cannot be understated enough. The long history of the development of property rights and individual rights began with the Magna Carta, and yet it is not even addressed in the history curriculum.

The final and perhaps most pervasive priority is ‘Sustainability’. Among other things, this priority addresses ‘the ongoing capacity of Earth to maintain all life’ and focuses on ‘protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through informed action’. The decision to prioritise sustainability—as opposed to another topic such as economic development—is inherently ideological.

In the Year 6 Civics and Citizenship curriculum, it is suggested students identify ‘the obligations people may consider they have as global citizens, such as an awareness of human rights issues, concern for the environment and sustainability, and being active and informed about global issues’.

The most damning example, however, is the inclusion of an entire unit on the history of the environment movement in the Year 10 History curriculum. The unit traces the growth of the environment movement, touches on ‘the notion of “Gaia”, “limits to growth” and the concept of “rights of nature”.’

Overall, there are 280 examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the content and elaborations of the curriculum. There are more than 126 references to sustainability and many more allusions to environmental matters. And there are 159 references to Asia, compared to just 56 mentions of Europe and less than 40 mentions of America.

This is not education. This is values-driven schooling designed by social elites who seek to indoctrinate Australian children under the guise of education.

There are at least two negative consequences of the imposition of these priorities. First the sheer quantity of content in the curriculum on the cross curriculum priorities means that other important content and knowledge is ‘crowded out’.

In their review of the National Curriculum, Dr Kevin Donnelly and Professor Wiltshire pointed out that, ‘No attempt seems to have been made ... to conceptualise the cross-curriculum priorities in educational terms.’ Much of the content relating to the priorities has little educational value, and so

distorts the purpose of a National Curriculum.

For example the Year 5 Mathematics curriculum suggests that students should spend a whole class counting bugs. It advises that they should pose 'questions about insect diversity in the playground, collecting data by taping a one metre- square piece of paper to the playground and observing the type and number of insects on it over time.' This activity is totally devoid of any educational value, taking time away from activities that may better promote key numeracy skills.

Examining the cross-curriculum priorities in isolation does nothing to reveal the true state of education in Australia. These three priorities must be considered in conjunction with the fact that there is mounting evidence that Australian students are leaving school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills.

The 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that Australia's rankings fell across the board since 2009—from fifteenth to nineteenth in mathematics, tenth to sixteenth in science, and ninth to fourteenth in reading.

The second negative, and potentially worse, consequence of these priorities is that it has inevitably resulted in the politicisation of education. By placing government mandated values in the curriculum, these priorities have altered the purpose of schooling. Instead of teaching children 'how to think', schools now teach them 'what to think'.

It is not the place of the government to highlight key themes as priorities for all disciplines. Rather, each discipline should have its own priorities. Mathematics should be about mathematics; English should be about English. The recommendation by Dr Kevin Donnelly and Professor Kenneth Wiltshire—that these value-laden themes have 'no educational basis' and should be removed—is welcome.

Plato said that the 'direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life'. In essence, a person's life journey or success is dependent upon the education they receive.

This is why schools must give their students the knowledge and skills they need, instead of being forced to focus on irrelevant and politicised themes.

Ideology has infected the National Curriculum. The cross curriculum priorities detract from the essence of education. They draw attention to value-laden themes, and dilute content that should be key to the subject. They encroach on the ability of schools to offer a curriculum or education experience that reflects the values of their school community.

And most significantly, they take from parents the power to instil in their children the values they believe are important.

Martin Luther King Jr said, 'The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.'

Our schools are entrusted with the responsibility to open a child's mind, fire their ambitions, and



equip them with the skills they need to succeed in life.

In trying to use schools to shape the values and beliefs of children schools—as an institution—are failing at their primary purpose: to educate.