



The Writing on the Wall

Publish Date:

December 2018

Returning to the true purpose of education can reverse plummeting academic standards, argues the IPA's Foundations of Western Civilisation Program director Bella d'Abrera.

The evidence is in. Dramatically falling standards in reading, science and mathematics across every economic quartile and in all schools indicate the National Curriculum—introduced nearly 20 years ago—is simply not working.

The recent cabinet reshuffle resulting in the appointment of Dan Tehan as the new Federal Minister for Education provides the government with the perfect opportunity to either do away with the curriculum altogether, or—at the very minimum—expunge the problematic and ideologically driven cross-curriculum priorities.

The impetus for a common curriculum to be used in all Australian schools came at the behest of the Hawke Government in the 1980s, which went so far as to devise a draft curriculum. This initiative was part of a larger education revolution effected by the ALP government in an attempt to



increase state control of education by amalgamating smaller tertiary training institutions, creating new universities from former Colleges of Advanced Education, and upgrading the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector.

The curriculum is unbalanced, biased and fundamentally hostile to Australia's Western Civilisation legacy

The push for a National Curriculum ebbed and flowed under subsequent governments, which helped pave the way for the Rudd-Gillard government to establish in 2008 the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), with primary functions including developing a National Curriculum. In its media release, the Rudd-Gillard government promised to "oversee the development of a rigorous, world-class national curriculum for all Australian students from kindergarten to Year 12, starting with the key learning areas of English, mathematics, the sciences and history". It vowed to provide a single curriculum which would "ensure that every child has access to the highest quality learning programs to lift achievement".

When the curriculum was eventually rolled out in 2011, it was lauded as a great leap forward in education, and hailed as a triumph. It would, by all accounts, signal a return to the basics, with a much-needed refocussing on literacy, numeracy, science, mathematics, history, and English. The national press enthusiastically took up the cause, headlining its launch with "Grammar time; Gillard outlines curriculum plans" and "Letters, sounds at core of new curriculum". Naturally, this gave Australian parents the distinct impression the Gillard government had delivered a curriculum which would provide their children with a world-class education.

Unfortunately, the National Curriculum created under the Rudd-Gillard government was neither rigorous nor world class. Nor did it signal a return to the basics, as had been promised. In fact, it was deeply flawed and ideologically driven. This was pointed out in 2011 by the Institute of Public Affairs in its *The National Curriculum: A Critique*, published as part of the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program monograph series. Among a number of concerns expressed by the IPA regarding the content and ideological approach of the curriculum was the notable absence of content relating to Western Civilisation.

In essence, the IPA concluded that "the rich, complex and essential legacy of Western Civilisation on which Australia's society and political system, and large swathes of our culture and history, have been built" were simply not treated in the curriculum. Australian children, it argued, were "not being taught the essentials of our free society, such as civil rights, and personal responsibility". Furthermore, while History had been made one of the four pillars of primary and secondary education by the curriculum's designers, they had then neglected the most important purpose of history as a discipline, which was to provide students with an opportunity to explore their significant past and the civilisation that has helped to create the world in which they live.

With a change of government, and just three years after its launch, the then education minister Christopher Pyne announced a timely review of the curriculum would be undertaken, stating the "truth about the benefits of Western Civilisation should be taught in our curriculum".

Dr Kevin Donnelly and Professor Kenneth Wiltshire were approached by the government to evaluate its “robustness, independence and balance”, concluding that—at the very least—the cross-curriculum priorities should be removed.

The Abbott government failed to act upon this recommendation.

In the light of the government’s intentions, the IPA submitted its own assessment and recommendations to the Department of Education. It re-stated its original position, maintaining that the curriculum was “unbalanced, biased and fundamentally hostile to Australia’s Western Civilisation legacy”. It also noted the focus of history teaching was on themes such as the environment, colonialism, multiculturalism, class and minority groups, while the history of ideas, liberalism, economic growth and technology, political history, Western Civilisation and religion were either under-emphasised or did not appear at all in the history curriculum.

The IPA also drew attention to one of the most problematic elements of the National Curriculum, which was, and continues to be, the existence of three cross-curriculum priorities: Sustainability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; and Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia. The curriculum is structured in such a way the priorities need to be emphasised and incorporated across all eight subjects— otherwise known as “learning areas”— which are English; Mathematics; Science; Humanities and Social Sciences; the Arts; Technologies; Health and Physical Education; and Languages.

LOWER PRIORITY FOR LITERACY AND NUMERACY

In English, students will “develop the skills necessary to investigate, analyse and communicate ideas and information related to sustainability, and to advocate, generate and evaluate actions for sustainable futures”.

In Mathematics, “students can develop the proficiencies of problem-solving and reasoning essential for the exploration of sustainability issues and their solutions”. In the meantime, five-year-olds are being taught how “Earth’s resources are used in a variety of ways” in Science class. In Level 2 Mathematics, algebra is taught by “using models such as linking blocks, sticks in bundles, place-value blocks and Aboriginal bead strings”.

In Measurement and Geometry, children are “investigating the seasons used by Aboriginal people, comparing them to those used in Western society and recognising the connection to weather patterns”.

The existence of these priorities serve no purpose other than ensure that essential content, such as literacy and numeracy, is given less priority. The problem of overcrowding is further compounded by the inclusion of an extra seven ‘general capabilities’—which are distinct from the ‘learning areas’—and which include Literacy, Numeracy, Information and Communication Technology Capability, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding.

Like the cross-curriculum priorities, teachers are also required to integrate the ‘capabilities’ into the coursework. As it turns out, the last three capabilities— critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding—have little to do with essential knowledge but a great deal to do with social justice and political commentary.

For example, in Personal and Social Capability, students “gain an understanding of the role of advocacy in contemporary society and build their capacity to critique societal constructs and forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism”.

In Ethical Understanding, “complex issues require responses that take account of ethical considerations such as human rights and responsibilities, animal rights, environmental issues and global justice”.

Intercultural Understanding, according to the curriculum’s authors, is “an essential part of living with others in the diverse world of the 21st century”.

Every moment teachers spend talking about these ideologically driven priorities and capabilities, is time not spent in class on developing fundamental skills.

There is little doubt the National Curriculum as it stands is failing to fulfil its very purpose, which is to educate Australian children. By the time they finish school, most Australians will know an awful lot about sustainability, environmental issues and social justice but very little about Western Civilisation, or how to read and write. Over the last 18 years, standards in reading, science and mathematics across every socio-economic quartile—and in government, Catholic and Independent schools—have been falling across Australia. Data compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals Australia is lagging behind the rest of the world and performing extremely poorly in world rankings.

Since 2015, reading literacy has fallen from 4th to 16th, mathematics plummeted from 7th to 25th, and science dropped from 4th to 14th. In all three disciplines, Australia is being outranked by countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Slovenia.

The OECD reports 14 per cent of 15-yearold Australian students are functionally illiterate, and would not understand the instructions on a packet of headache tablets. What is more, 20 per cent of Australian youth lack basic arithmetic skills, and would not be able to work out how much petrol is left in a tank by looking at a gauge.

In its 2014 submission, the IPA recommended that “rather than amending or adjusting the National Curriculum to fix these problems, the most sustainable and liberal solution would be to scrap the National Curriculum” altogether. Government should instead focus on eliminating those barriers which prevent schools from choosing and developing their own curriculum in consultation with their school community.

Standards in reading, science and mathematics have been falling across Australia

The government's solution to this crisis in education has been, and continues to be, to increase spending. In 2010, Julia Gillard commissioned an Australian businessman with no discernible experience in education to chair a committee to make recommendations regarding education funding in Australia. David Gonski called for an extra \$5 billion per year and the government responded by offering \$14.5 billion over six years. In 2012 he released 41 recommendations which accompanied Gillard's promise to propel Australia's school system into the top five internationally by 2025. Given the rate at which standards are falling, this goal is set to be unattainable.

In 2017, the Turnbull government commissioned Gonski to chair yet another panel. On this occasion, Gonski's role was to provide advice on how additional expenditure on school education might be spent over the next decade.

Between 2018 and 2027, under its Quality Schools Package, the government has pledged to spend an enormous \$243.5 billion, plus an extra \$5.1 million on science, technology, engineering and maths. Gonski clearly did not know back in 2010 and he still doesn't know in 2018. Just why the government chose to consult him for a second time when his original reforms have been an abject failure remains a mystery. He is a formidable lawyer, banker, and businessman who currently sits on 40 boards, but his entire experience in education is as Chancellor of the University of New South Wales.

FUNDING'S NOT THE PROBLEM

The correlation between the quantity of money being spent on the system and the deteriorating standards of literacy and numeracy reveals the problem lies not with funding, but rather with the education system itself. The focus of education in Australia in 2018, as apparent in the National Curriculum, has shifted from a system based on knowledge and facts, to one of skills and capabilities, underpinned by an ideologically driven, thematically integrated curriculum which prioritises the environment and social justice issues over anything else.

This dramatic shift away from knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself stems from the progressive left, which has adopted the romantic but completely misguided Rousseauan concept of education based on his notion that "man is born free, but is everywhere in chains"—meaning institutions such as education get in the way of this freedom. In his 1762 treatise on education and the nature of man, *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau opened with the famous line: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man." He believed the subordination of students to teachers and memorising facts would be detrimental to the education of the child, and discouraged book learning in favour of interactions with the world as well as the development of 'sentiment'.

In 2018, the progressive left firmly believe schools are vehicles for transforming society and has thus moved away from the traditional methods of teaching. The National Curriculum as it stands displays all the hallmarks of a progressive education.



These are an emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking, learning by doing and experimental learning, the development of social skills, a de-emphasis on text books, the inclusion of subjects which look forward to skills needed in future society, and emphasis of lifelong learning and social skills.

In its belief that education is responsible for making people less free it has, by and large, re-defined what education is.

TRUE FREEDOM

True freedom, however, comes from encouraging young people to read the great books that the Western Canon has given us, to enjoy literature for its own sake, by inspiring them to learn about historical events, and by teaching them how to read and write. Only then will they be able to think for themselves and undertake real critical thinking.

As Katharine Birbalsingh, founder and headmistress of Michaela Community School, a free school in London, recently commented, “as a matter of logic, it is impossible to teach children to think critically unless they have something to think about”.

People become inquisitive and begin to think critically when they know things, and only then can they apply this knowledge in different ways.

While in government, Simon Birmingham recognised that young Australians were not being given the vital literacy skills which would set them up for life, and his solution was to simply spend more money and to undertake yet another review of the curriculum. Dan Tehan has promised that his government will strongly resist coming under bureaucratic pressure to redesign the National Curriculum in the wake of ACARA’s announcement of yet another review.

Tehan should consign the National Curriculum to the bin. As long as this ideologically driven, overcrowded, progressive curriculum continues to exist, the education sector will continue to fail in its core task to put student outcomes first.

The Rudd/Gillard government education revolution set in motion a fundamental change in Commonwealth-state relations by introducing a number of highly centralised and bureaucratic national partnership agreements. This revolution was justified in the language of raising standards and strengthening schools, but achieved the exact opposite.

Rather than following educational fads as does ACARA, Australia should return to the true purpose of education: to develop intelligence, form character and furnish people with knowledge.

The Federal government needs to return to playing a secondary role to the state governments and their respective education bureaucracies. Schools should be free to follow their own education philosophy or one which reflects the needs of communities.

Finally, power should be devolved to the states, which in turn should then be transferred to school



communities, so that parents are given greater responsibility for the education of their children.

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This article is adapted from a talk first given to the Christopher Dawson Centre for Cultural Studies on 1 November 2018, at a function held at Parliament House, Hobart, Tasmania.