

**YAT081051**

*AARE Conference Paper QUT Brisbane, December 2008*

*As part of symposium: Australian Curriculum Inquiry as 'Really Useful'  
Educational Research: A Symposium*

**Australian Curriculum 1975-2005:  
what has been happening to knowledge?**

**Lyn Yates and Cherry Collins<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract*

This paper is both about the difficulty of seriously studying curriculum in Australia and about some tentative analyses of state curriculum policies over the period 1975-2005. Both perspectives are findings of an ARC-funded project entitled *School Knowledge, working knowledge and the knowing subject: a review of state curriculum policies 1975-2005*. The aim of the project was to map curriculum emphases and orientations in each state at each mid-decade point between 1975 and 2005, to show something of the differences and consistencies over time and between states. It was intended also to provide some background and ways of thinking about current curriculum questions and moves to national curriculum that do not begin from these current debates. The project has proved almost impossible to carry out in the time and with the resources allocated to it, because 'curriculum' and even 'curriculum policy' is a highly ambiguous term, and because documents and reports that might be seen as relevant take many forms, and are not well maintained or catalogued or easily accessed. This paper describes the strategies we took to attempt to fulfil the intent of this study and our interpretation of some major shifts over this period in relation to the approach to curriculum and some significant comparative differences between states.

*Address details:*

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Alice Hoy Building, University of Melbourne, Vic 3010. Email: [l.yates@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:l.yates@unimelb.edu.au) Phone: 03 8344 8166.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: Both authors have been co-investigators on the project discussed in this paper and contributed to the analysis which forms the second part of this paper. The paper itself has been written by Lyn Yates.

## **Australian Curriculum 1975-2005: what has been happening to knowledge?**

### *Introduction*

‘Curriculum’ and ‘curriculum inquiry’ are terms of considerable ambiguity. Both the scope of the object of study and the kinds of disciplinary and extra-disciplinary lenses we bring to the study are shifting and contentious. People who consider themselves curriculum scholars or researchers may work in networks and go to conferences that have almost no overlap with others who see themselves similarly. The issue of what curriculum is about is one that has particularly preoccupied me since I was appointed to a Chair in Curriculum, and my best answer to the question was this:

#### *Curriculum is about the ‘what’ of education*

*[...] I think many people are a bit unclear about what it means to be an academic who works in curriculum; what it means to do curriculum research. Isn't a curriculum something that is handed down by the government, or the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, or the board that runs the International Baccalaureate? It is in part, but that doesn't mean that what curriculum is about is something cut and dried, something that doesn't warrant research, scholarship, dialogue, debate. Curriculum is about conceptions of what should be in those frameworks that get handed down, and it is about how that should be done; but it also involves research on unintended effects, on what happens in practice. Curriculum questions are difficult ones because they involve both big picture thinking, and attention to everyday pragmatics. Curriculum questions look at the substance of what school does; they go beyond just seeing schooling as a black box that produces scores and outcomes patterns. Curriculum asks us to think about what is being set up to be taught and learned, what is actually being taught, what is actually being learned, why agendas are taken up or not taken up, who benefits and loses, whose voice is heard and whose is silenced, what future is being formed for individuals and what future is being set in train for Australia as a whole. Curriculum is concerned with effectiveness, but also with expansiveness and voices, and who gets a say.*

(from my Inaugural Lecture, June 2006<sup>2</sup>)

In other words, I think there are different kinds of work to be done in relation to curriculum, and I also think that what is useful to do changes over time and by place. In the past I have undertaken curriculum projects focusing on core curriculum, on gender on young people in different school contexts, on vocational knowledge and on

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/Yates\\_What\\_can\\_schools\\_do.doc](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/Yates_What_can_schools_do.doc)

computers. But in my PhD(1986) I had been interested in how the field of curriculum study itself was conceptualized; and in this current decade, with a new surge of questions and developments seemingly evident in relation to curriculum, I decided it would be of interest to try to get some more systematic knowledge and overview of curriculum making around Australia for the three decades prior to the current national curriculum developments.

### *The Project*

When I started my postgraduate study of Education in the 1970s, curriculum was a major object of interest both publicly and in academia. Claims to knowledge and authority were being questioned in the streets in May 1968 in Paris; cheap paperbacks by such writers as Illich, Freire, Holt, Kozol, Barnes were questioning what schools do and being widely read (and Illich and Freire came to Australia and spoke to big audiences about their work); new sociology of education was attacking the idea of the neutrality of curriculum, and was locked in argument with philosophers about how we might think about curriculum; new curriculum journals were founded in Australia, Canada, UK and USA; the women's movement was producing a new focus of attack on the distorting nature of curriculum; Australian teachers' unions and associations were publishing articles and holding conferences about curriculum and assessment; and towards the end of that decade a national Curriculum Development Centre was set up, with Malcolm Skilbeck attempting to promote a national discussion about a Core Curriculum for Australian Schools. Over the next few decades new curriculum policies were produced, and some academic work on curriculum continued, but there was a sense in my mind that the scholarly and public action had moved elsewhere: to effective schooling, to pedagogy rather than curriculum. But in the early 00s, curriculum seemed to be back on the agenda. Once again there were debates in the newspapers, and there was a new wave of discussions about curriculum: the new basics/essential learnings discussions; the critical realist move within sociology; issues about interdisciplinarity and different modes of knowledge, and the like.

Having lived through 30 years of new reports and policies for curriculum, and having worked on different kinds of projects over that time<sup>3</sup> and given that curriculum was being debated so prominently again, I decided it would be useful to try to get some perspective across Australia and across four mid-decade points about what kinds of shifts and different conceptions had previously been seen as the ones we should follow. The move to a new National Curriculum Board was on the horizon, but the intention in my project was to step back from the immediate discussions to get a sense of where we had been, so the time-frame I chose was 1975 to 2005.

In this project, my intention was to analyze curriculum policy in terms of ‘what’ rather than ‘why’ and is centred on these questions:

- Where is **knowledge** seen to reside, and what sort of a thing is it seen to be?
- How are the ‘**academic**’ and ‘**vocational**’ purposes of schooling depicted?
- What characteristics and dispositions is **the learner** assumed to bring to schooling, and how is **difference** among learners construed in terms of curriculum policies?
- What types of knowledge and what types of outcomes are named as **core**?
- How are agendas about schooling as a vehicle of **knowledge and learning** of the young being put together with agendas about **schooling as a mechanism of competitive selection** for life beyond school?

The background of this project then was twofold. One was a feeling that, although there are exceptions (for example Marsh, 1994; Sherington and Campbell 2005) we have only the most limited and usually impressionistic sense of our own history of schooling in Australia (Green 2003; Cormack & Green forthcoming). Studies are usually done within state not across states; or alternatively focus on commonwealth but not within state developments. We have *impressions* of persisting different kinds

---

<sup>3</sup> Over this time I had worked on different kinds of projects related to curriculum, some focused on theory and academic conceptions; some on policy; some on practices in particular institutions: beginning with major reviews of the literature of the field for the 1980 Core Curriculum project, then on feminism and gender reform in policy and practice; a view of schools through the eyes and developing subjectivity of students in the longitudinal 12 to 18 Project; and after I moved to UTS, projects on vocational perspectives on pedagogy, and on computers and learning

of emphases in different states (especially NSW compared with SA for example), and also of some waves of change when, say, there is a move towards comprehensive high schools in the 1970s and early 1980s, or the takeup of profiles in the 90s, or the move to essential learnings and competencies in the late 90s – but it is extremely difficult to get a documented sense across Australia of what has been going on. In this project we wanted to look at major documents in the period 1975 to 2005 and get some overview or map of what was being picked out as important in relation to these questions about knowledge, learners, difference, vocational and academic across states and over time.

We also wanted to do interviews with people in different states who had had some longstanding involvements with curriculum of their state. In some cases these people had worked in education departments, sometimes in universities, sometimes in boards of studies and the like. This was intended to supplement our sense of what was happening at different periods; but also to talk more subjectively and reflectively about what might be called the curriculum culture of that state. What did that state context tend to throw up as its important agendas? How and by whom did curriculum get done? In part then the project was also intended to provide further insight into curriculum as a process or arena of activity and inquiry.

### *Curriculum Inquiry in Australia: why so difficult?*

In putting together the initial application for ARC funding for this project<sup>4</sup> I foresaw and addressed some of the difficulties of carrying out the project I was proposing. Of course it would not be able to provide a 30 year history of Australian schooling with only 1.5 part-time researchers in a 2 year time-frame – it was to be a focus on key points over that period. And of course, curriculum is about what is done in subjects, not just at a broad policy level, and one might get a quite different perspective on what was happening and how if we started with subjects (a point reiterated strongly in a later interview with Paul Brock, who rightly pointed to the different sense of ongoing debates and networks both inside and outside Australia one might get looking within the field of English). But I proposed what seemed like a useful starting point to

---

<sup>4</sup> This discussion (Section E of the ARC application) can be found on the project website: <http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/>

a mapping of change. We would take 10 year intervals, at 1975, 1985, 1995 and 2005, and for each state at that point in time look at the major reports and policies that were framing the activity at that time:

The project will focus on (1) formal statements of intent and values in relation to curriculum (which might or might not have a direct regulatory dimension); (2) curriculum and assessment guidelines issued to schools; (3) regulatory arrangements, especially in relation to the handling of different streams.

(from the ARC application

<http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/>)

But we soon found that the project application had grossly under-estimated the difficulty of sourcing and collecting documents for analysis. What I had envisaged as a relatively straightforward task soon proved to be something that needed a much longer time-frame than the two years I had asked for, and more people to work on it than the meagre funding would allow. There are both practical and conceptual difficulties. The practical difficulties are that most states do not keep proper archives of previous policies (and this is getting worse as we move to online forms of policy) and we have only a very limited amount of secondary analyses<sup>5</sup>. We can get much of the current policies and regulations sitting at our computer, but trying to find documents relating to 1975, 1985 and 1995 is a major exercise.

Even trying to find out what documents we should be looking for was not an easy task. We read secondary sources, and spent time in the ACER library, but our first research associate on the project found it all too hard and resigned, and we decided we would need to use the interviews in the different states in part as a starting point to find out what documents we needed to be looking for, as well as for their intended role in the project - as a source of reflection about that state that we would be looking to analyse (it had originally been thought of as a more linear study where we would

---

<sup>5</sup> In my first year as Professor of Curriculum (2005) at the University of Melbourne with Bill Green I held a two day discussion about curriculum inquiry which brought together a number of people who had worked on this area for some time. One of the reiterated themes of the discussion was the relatively meagre state of the field in this country in terms of established positions in universities, and in terms of the very limited amount of our own history that was available for students.

first collect and map documents, and then analyse and conduct interviews to respond to, extend and challenge our thinking) .

And there was the problem of how wide should be the scope of our collection. For example, the project was originally wanting to focus on how the various curriculum policies conceived of students, what perspective they took about differences among students for example. Over this period many states produced specific statements on girls or boys, or Indigenous students, or students with disabilities, as well as their overall major inquiries and curriculum restructures. And how far to go with an analysis of assessment policies? It is often in the detail that we begin to get a sense of what is really having some impact on what gets done in schools. As you think further about the questions I set out earlier, you can see the extent of the work that is needed to really come to grips with them.

Given our resources, we<sup>6</sup> refined our list of documents we would attempt to ‘map’ by going back and forth from library and secondary inquiries, initial interviews, a tentative list, and feedback on that list from people in the state in question. (The list is on our website: [http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/chrono\\_index.html](http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/chrono_index.html) and the summaries of the documents, the kind of initial ‘map’ envisaged are now almost finished.)

But the project had two intentions: one was to provide a resource and overview (which we are working towards via our website, where we also invite further contributions from others); and the other was to use this work to analyse and reflect on Australian curriculum policies and approaches. Studying the documents and carrying out the interviews is work being undertaken against a backdrop of very lively contemporary curriculum discussion, both in the scholarly field and in the work of the new Australian National Curriculum Board. In the rest of the paper, I want to talk about one initial conceptual take on what we seem to have been finding in the work

---

<sup>6</sup> The ‘we’ here refers to Katie Wright, our excellent research associate in the second year of our project who has carried out most of the work involved in setting up the website, as well as to Cherry and myself.

on the project, including the reason for the title of this paper, ‘what has been happening to knowledge?’ In this paper, I will be focusing on some aspects of major developments across the study and over time which were evident in most state activities, rather than on issues of state difference in their curriculum work, which are also evident from our investigations and will be discussed elsewhere.

The title for the paper arises from two observations from our work on the project to this point. First, in the policies themselves there is a strong shift over the period we are examining from an emphasis on knowing things to being able to do things (though I think the current discussion papers of the National Curriculum Board are altering that trajectory); and secondly, in the interviews, we have been struck by how rarely knowledge itself comes into the frame of the talk about curriculum compared with discussion of curriculum as management of resources and outcomes, politics, values; and compared with a focus on the developing child (from a cognitive developmental perspective). The two major developments in curriculum policy for schools we want to focus on here is the stream of activity from the late 80s into the 90s attempting to construct curriculum in terms of ‘statements and profiles’; and the stream of work since the late 90s that attempted to work with concepts of ‘essential learnings’.

### *Statements and Profiles*

At the height of concern for Australia’s economic future, in the late 80s, John Dawkins, the Commonwealth Minister responsible for education training and employment applied enormous pressure on the States to construct a common national curriculum rather than separate State curricula. Initially, in 1988 he got agreement from the Australian Education Council (AEC – the body representing all State Ministers of Education) for a mapping exercise which examined the degree of curriculum commonality across the States. This mapping exercise was then followed by an attempt to write a common curriculum framework.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> In practice the attempt to produce this was a fraught one marked by considerable political manoeuvring between States and their representatives.(Marsh,1994)



The national Statements produced in this exercise were common agreements about the shape and coverage of a curriculum 'area'. Beginning with an agreement to produce a national Statement on mathematics as a Key Learning Area (KLA) in April 1989, by 1991 the States had agreed to Statements covering the sweep of the school curriculum under eight Key Learning Areas: mathematics, English, technology, science, the arts, languages other than English (LOTE), studies of society and the environment (SOCE), and Health. Inside each KLA there were further divisions into strands: for example, in mathematics there was a Number strand, a Space strand, a Measurement strand and so on; in SOCE there was a Time, Continuity and Change strand, a Place and Space strand, a Resources strand and so on. In many KLAs there were even further divisions into sub-strands.

The agreement to divide the content knowledges of the curriculum into eight piles and to treat these in a common way as school subjects and forms of knowledge was a bureaucratic resolution to the problem of how state differences of curriculum substance and form might be brought together, but it was also one in which the form of the knowledges that were to be managed within this template were not a central driver of the settlement arrived at.

In terms of the Statements or scope of subject areas, some initial negotiations took place about what kinds of knowledge or topics would be put where. Health, for example, included living skills, community awareness, the food and nutrition aspect of home economics, sport, human relationships, human movement, safety, sexuality, substance abuse, fitness, values education, recreation and much more besides. Environmental education was located in the same KLA as the study of society and not as part of knowledge about the physical world in science. There was no meta-level discussion for example about different kinds of knowledges which needed different Statements because they had to be approached in different ways.

The Profiles which set out a hierarchy of learning outcomes for each KLA, also had to conform to a bureaucratic template of levels, regardless of different forms which development in different subject areas might take. But the resolution here managed a

rapprochement of two different views: a child-focused developmentalism and an instrumental economism.

The political drive to have consistent frameworks and accountability represented a belief that this new national template and consistent form could be a mechanism for greater efficiency and effectiveness in producing skills and knowledge for the national interest. The conceptualisation of Profiles was the work of the Australian Cooperative Assessment Program (ACAP), a group being pressured by the AEC (the council of all State Ministers of Education) to devise an Australia-wide assessment programme. In 1989, Garth Boomer, the head of the Curriculum Branch in the South Australian school system became the chair of ACAP and rapidly turned it into a meeting of State curriculum bureaucrats rather than assessment experts (Marsh,1994: 63). Boomer stood behind a child centred, developmental view of curriculum. He was very clear about what he was doing in devising and standing behind the Profiles.

I write with the strong conviction that Australian educators cannot sit on their hands; that current accumulating pressures for better assessing and reporting will not go away, and that it behoves educators to take the vanguard and the control in developing the best possible system. (Boomer,1992:61).

The task of the Profile writing teams was to define the series of eight developmental levels in each Strand in their KLA. They were to use current curricula in school systems across Australia to do this. The levels were to be written in terms of outcomes, statements of what a child who had reached that level in that strand in that KLA would be able to do. Thus the levels set standards against which all children's performances could be monitored and reported.

Uniquely these levels were not tied to a particular stage of schooling. They were much more child-centred and developmentally mystical than that. They were envisaged as a pathway along which individual children, at their own pace, would make their way. The point was to force teachers into a developmental view of the learning process. Rather than envisaging their children as successes or failures at the Year Eight curriculum, for example, they were supposed to re-envisage them as all at varying points along strand pathways, but all developing onwards and upwards.

The writing of the levels as performance outcomes put a particular twist, in most Key Learning Areas, on each writing team's conceptualisation of what was 'developing'. The outcome had to be written in terms of what the child could do. Thus at level five in SOCE (Studies of Society and Environment), students needed to show that they could identify, illustrate, contrast, compare, use evidence to show, examine and explain, review, analyse, explore and report and so on. This contrasts with Level 2 where students needed to show that they could group and label, arrange, identify, describe, role-play, compare, classify, record, list, draw and so on. Teachers in SOCE, as in most other areas outside maths and science, were largely free to choose the content through which much of this was taught. Thus the curriculum, through the Profiles was shifted from particular content knowledge to particular cognitive skills, from substantive to cognitive procedural knowledges. The developmental theory behind all this is never specified.

While the compulsory adoption of the Statements and Profiles was rejected in mid-1993, all States in fact took them on to some degree in the 90s as their definitional curriculum framework documents for the compulsory years of schooling with or without minor adaptations to existing State curricula. Furthermore, when they proved absurdly complex and unworkable in the classroom, States simply adapted them, retaining their fundamental shape of cognitive developmentalism married to outcomes. The adaptations have simplified the number of strands and outcomes, tinkered with Learning Areas and the number of levels, and tied the developmental levels somewhat closer to school Year levels (examples include (New South Wales,2002; Victoria, Board of Studies 2000; Western Australia,1998).

### *Essential Learnings/Capabilities*

While the Statements and Profiles story tell one story about what has happened to traditional curriculum subject knowledges in Australia, at least to Year 10 (age 16), another more recent story is the focus since the turn of the millennium on thinking about knowledge outside subject matter boundaries altogether, in such forms as 'essential learning's', 'new basics', 'capabilities' and the like.

Essential learnings and capabilities have taken the idea of new skills for new times seriously. The new times argument is that globalisation, particularly the globalisation of capital, and the growth of ICT as the major medium through which work and other communication happens, has revolutionised the economic world in which young people will have to find work. The new worker needs to be able to reinvent him/herself, to develop new skills, to move between organizations, and above all to develop the meta-cognitive skills to steer themselves and their own lives. The same sources of change have also revolutionised the social world of young people and their senses of both community and identity, Community, identity and indeed, integrity have now to be constructed rather than being provided through stable work and geographical community reference points (Carnoy,2000; Castells,1996).

Different States have made different lists of skills from the burgeoning literature on the new knowledges required for the twenty-first century. Tasmania for example, listed Essential Learnings under five headings: Thinking, Communication, Personal Futures, Social Responsibility and World Futures aimed at producing “enquiring and reflective thinkers, effective communicators, self-directed and ethical people, responsible citizens, world contributors” (Tasmania,2002,p.7). Queensland envisages Essential Learnings as a broad, all-encompassing category that encompasses Key Learning Area knowledges. But what is new about Essential Learnings is that it includes ‘new times’ learnings which cut right across Key Learning Area boundaries: knowledge skills and attributes “required for complex, real-life challenges such as higher-order thinking skills and social and personal competence” and knowledge, skills and attributes “needed for good communication and ongoing learning such as literacy, numeracy, life skills, information and communication technologies and cultural skills” (Queensland, Department of Education and the Arts 2005, p.5). In Victoria, the ‘new times’ Essential Learnings have been written with outcome levels and standards and must be monitored and reported in the same way as subject area knowledges (Victoria, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority,2005). The challenge has been to move the new times Essential Learnings into the curriculum in such a way that they are not mere platitudes. From interviews with a number of people involved in these developments in various ways, we find widespread goodwill and defence of the intentions of the new approaches, but widespread

acknowledgement of the problems that occurred when these were specified in concrete curriculum template form, especially when married to new demands for standards, benchmarking, assessment and accountability.

Essential Learnings or capabilities are a wish list of what students might need to understand and be able to do to address the challenges of the future, across community and private life as well as working life for each student. Indeed in Tasmania, this ‘wish list’ was a literal one, in that the exercise began with some very extensive community consultations about what knowledge parents and others saw as important and essential in current times.

Essential Learnings and Capabilities have some roots in the vocationally-led interest in Key Competencies that began in the late 1980s, but also have deeper roots in the Australian school systems. Australian culture has long had a utilitarian bias. The point of the academic curriculum for most parents and students is not intrinsic to it. It is not the acquisition of the knowledges themselves that matter to them, or even their direct value as markers of status. Rather one studies academic knowledge in schools because marks in them count in the university entrance ranking system which operates across Australia, and they are routes to professional employment. Those not aspiring to university see schooling’s purpose as employment quite directly. And employers’ voices are often sought and heard strongly in the frequent reports that are commissioned to produce directions for the purposes of school overall. Schooling’s current location within the national productivity agenda is not an unfitting end point to its long utilitarian history

Second, the idea of a fresh approach to the secondary curriculum that no longer starts with academic subjects is one way of resolving a dilemma that has been the focus of much curriculum policy attention in Australia since the 1980s, as it has been elsewhere. The agenda has been to increase retention through to the end of schooling, and to do so in most states within a broad ‘equal opportunity’ frame that disowns a previous time where the channelling of working class girls and boys to different kinds of more skills-based education and futures was overt. Traditional academic subjects

have been seen as a major stumbling block to full retention and to a true sense of commonality in the post-compulsory schooling years. In most States only certain traditional academic subjects have been accepted by the universities for tertiary entrance ranking purposes and thus, inside the comprehensive secondary schools, there has been, even without a differentiated vocational stream, a tiered system of subjects with the academic tier infinitely more prestigious. Employer, parent and student prejudices have combined to make staying at school to study the non-academic (or 'watered-down academic') tiers an unattractive proposition. The tilt towards academic knowledge is thus seen as a major stumbling block to making the senior secondary years 'democratic' (Teese & Polesel,2003). As in Britain, so in Australia since the 1970s, the academic curriculum has been widely seen as a source of social injustice in the thinking of sociologists of education (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett,1982) and that view has been reinforced by post-modernism. Approaching curriculum as 'Essential learnings' or capabilities is less tied to inherited cultural capital, and is seen as having more opportunity of differentiating approaches for different students without maintaining a tie to an inherited hierarchy of subjects. In following this route, especially in states like South Australia and Tasmania, Australia has sought a 'third way' that is neither academic in emphasis nor vocational.

Once again here, in the construct of Essential Learnings and Capabilities, as in the construct of Profiles, we see a genuine concern for the developing child, on the one hand, and on the other, an awareness of problems of the future (this time for the personal rather than the national economic future). In between, an instrumental 'fix' is imagined, without, in most cases, careful attention to the nature of knowledge or of the differing power of different kinds of knowledges or of what is possible in classrooms – that is assumed to be work that will be done in another stage where policy is turned into more subject- and level- specific templates to guide the work of schools. These developments are the background to the new work of the National Curriculum Board, whose discussion papers in many ways are representing some return to a focus on discipline knowledge as a starting point. (We do recognize that the account we have given here underplays some continuity in the curriculum approaches in particular subject areas over this time, but our focus on the templates,

frameworks and agendas the subject teams and teachers were being asked to fit is a distinctly different starting point from the NCB starting with the subjects themselves.)

### *Discussion*

Three themes of Australian policy-level discourse seem to come together in the developments of the 1980s and 1990s that are discussed in this paper: a strong utilitarian vision of education, a particular form of Australian egalitarianism, and a focus on the developing child/learner/person as the key agenda (curriculum as preparing the person in the world rather than developing or conveying the world in the person). In those developments, notwithstanding overt political debates about curriculum values, there was some convergence in the agendas for curriculum coming from both the left and the right. For example, a move to rewrite curriculum in terms of explicit outcomes and activities which received prominence in the context of political agendas to control and audit and increase accountability, also has a strong legacy in progressive thinking about curriculum. For example, in Victoria, Bill Hannan, previous editor of two teacher union journals, and later (1980s) founding chair of the Board of Studies in Victoria was a very prominent advocate of the position that '[assessment] goals should always be attainable' (rather than judged through tacit lenses of social distinction (Hannan 1985))<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the Employers Federation and the Australian Qualifications Framework have promoted 'observable competencies' as the form of knowledge that matters. In both cases what is being emphasized is capabilities, and the individual being able to do things in the world.

One source of the Australian emphases we have drawn attention to in this paper relates to the way curriculum is made in Australia, and also the focus of our own project – what we are looking at and not looking at. We have been looking at the overarching level of curriculum policy-making in Australia and the assumptions it reflects. Those involved are particularly the politicians and their representatives (the AEC is made up of the state ministers of Education) and a stratum of 'professional' curriculum workers and leaders who have often worked in a range of roles over their

---

<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association whose journal Bill Hannan edited had at one point taken the provocative position that school curriculum and assessment practices were so irredeemably riddled with class privilege, that entry to university should be by ballot.

career, such as Garth Boomer, Paul Brock, Bill Hannan, Alan Reid and others. Such people are often commissioned to bring together major policies and broker the literature and thinking of their field and the political concerns of the day in doing so. Once the major reports and overarching frameworks are produced, subject specialists and teams (including teachers, those who work in curriculum branches, disciplinary specialists from university education faculties etc) are left to produce the more detailed documents for particular areas, and supporting materials. We have not studied what happened in these subject details nor what happened on the ground in schools. We took that other level because it represents one way of focusing on changing assumptions, and because the forms it sets up do produce constraints and directions for the other sites of curriculum practice. And one thing that is part of the story we have drawn attention to in this paper is its historical and generational specificity. Many of those involved as curriculum ‘professionals’, and also many of the Labor politicians, were formed in periods (the 70s) in which concerns about social justice, students as developing individuals, and a changing economy have all had high priority. The way in which the Profiles and Essential Learnings/capabilities approaches solve a political and managerial dilemma (auditing and creating commonality via templates), but also offer a space in which a ‘progressive’ personal development agenda focusing on procedural knowledges can be incorporated, and in which direct epistemological issues can be left outside the big discussion, is part of this Australian story.

#### *Acknowledgement*

The project *School Knowledge, Working Knowledge and the Knowing Subject: a review of state curriculum policies 1975-2005* is funded by a 2007-8 ARC Discovery Grant for which we are very grateful. In addition to Lyn Yates and Cherry Collins who are working on this as chief investigators, Katie Wright has worked as a research fellow and contributed a great deal to the production of the overview lists and resources and website. Other contributions to research activity of the project have been made by Brenda Holt, May Leckey, Glenn Savage and by the people who have generously contributed to the interviews, and whose perspectives will be discussed more directly in other papers.



## References

- Boomer, G. (1992). The advent of standards in Australian education. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 12(1), 61-66.
- Carnoy, M. (2000). *Sustaining the New Economy: Work, family and community in the Information Age*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The Information Age: Economy Society and Culture. I& II*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Connell, R. W., Ashenden, D. J., Kessler, S., & Dowsett, G. W. (1982). *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin.
- Cormack, P. and Green, B (forthcoming) 'Rereading the historical record: curriculum history and the (post) linguistic turn'. In Baker, B.(ed) *New Curriculum Histories* Rotterdam: Sense Publishing.
- Green, B.(2003) 'Curriculum Inquiry in Australia: Towards a local genealogy of the curriculum field'. In Pinar, W. (ed). *Handbook of International Curriculum Research* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hannan, B.(1985). *Democratic Schooling: essays on schooling and society*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Marsh, C. J. (1994). *Producing a national curriculum: Plans and paranoia*. St Leonards: Alen & Unwin.
- Queensland, Department of Education Training and the Arts (2000). New Basics Project. Retrieved 14.08.08
- Sherington, G and Campbell, C. (2005) *The comprehensive public high school : historical perspectives* New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Tasmania, Department of Education (2002). Essential Learnings Framework. Hobart: Department of Education.
- Teese, R., & Polesel, J. (2003). *Undemocratic Schooling: equity and quality in mass secondary education in Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Victoria, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2005). Victorian Essential Learning Standards: Overview. East Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.
- Yates, L. (1986) 'Curriculum theory and non-sexist education: a discussion of Victorian education policy and practice 1975-1985'. Unpublished thesis, La Trobe University.
- Yates, L. (2006) 'What can schools do? Knowledge, social identity and the changing world'. Inaugural Professorial Lecture, University of Melbourne.