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Curriculum and Capacity-Building: Some Contemporary Tensions

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Curriculum, as distinct from the narrower term learning, is concerned with forming the person (values, dispositions, social relationships) as well as building capacities, abilities, achievements. In the past half-century global developments have significantly influenced national and regional curriculum activities on both fronts: by Millennial Goals and projects related to a 'global citizen'; and by the pervasive influence of OECD-led assessments and rankings promoted as authoritative measures of what is being achieved.

Drawing on international accounts of contemporary curriculum re-working (Yates & Grumet 2011), this paper identifies issues that persist alongside these globalizing movements. On curriculum's identity role, building national affiliations remains important, and internationally enhanced globalization has produced renewed attention to national stories and priorities in curriculum reform. And difference remains a problem in reproducing inequalities. In curriculum's knowledge-building role, the desire for new global '21st century skills', confronts problematic issues about what are necessary foundations in fields like science, and what concretely should be taught over 12 or 13 years of schooling, problems not solved by PISA assessments.

The paper, will illustrate the tensions outlined by reference to the new national curriculum framework being developed in Australia.

In the late 20th century, in part courtesy of the OECD, most nations began to take education very seriously as a core component of their national economic capacity. And they began to see both education and economic capacity in a particular way: as relative performance on globally comparative and competitive standards. The global education performance measures themselves (PISA in particular, but also ISA etc, and other studies on school participation and retention) were assessment-based documents, aiming to measure 'learning' but not, as such, to prescribe a particular curriculum, and indeed they tended to be more closely allied to numerous studies of school and teacher effectiveness than to curriculum discussions as such. But the curriculum issue itself has simultaneously been the subject of an almost unprecedented wave of reform and public attention.

In this paper I want to draw on my current research projects on Australia to develop a case about the form of curriculum in these times. First in terms of a broad framework for considering curriculum I want to make two arguments: (1) that recent times have seen revived *national* drivers of curriculum change and reform, not just global and international ones; and (2) that the arguments by Young, Muller, Moore and others about 'bringing knowledge back in' inadequately recognize identity formation as an important purpose of schools and an important component of epistemic capacity. Secondly, taking evidence from my research on the Australian developments, I want to show three tensions or problems inherent in the directions curriculum policy and management of recent times has taken: (i) a short-termism that may undermine capacity in a more substantial sense; (ii) a drawing of curriculum into public/political discourse in a way that can produce both emptying of

content and over-loading of content in relation to knowledge; and (iii) an approach to anxieties about social integration that may produce scepticism rather than the desired national affiliation.

Background: the two research projects

The discussion that follows draws on two research projects funded by the Australian Research Council. The first project, *School Knowledge, working knowledge and the knowing subject: a review of state curriculum policies 1975-2005*¹ used policy documents and interviews with curriculum actors in the various Australian states to analyse changes over time, and commonalities and differences between states in their general curriculum policies, in the period prior to the establishment of a new National Curriculum Board, which has subsequently been renamed the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, and is leading development of a new 'Australian Curriculum' (see <http://www.acara.edu.au>).

This project found that in Australia, in the period since 1975, over 100 new general curriculum policies were developed around the states, as well as a very large number of reports and reforms on particular subjects, student groups, inequalities and the like (Yates, Collins and O'Connor 2011). The prefaces to many of these documents express similar concerns and hopes: awareness of changing forms of employment, and of a competitive global environment; awareness of changing technologies and a 'knowledge explosion' and concerns about schooling related to that; a world of changing travel and migration patterns, and an interest in citizenship and values related to that; and a belief in the importance of secondary education completion for all alongside a desire for 'excellence'.

The project found too that during this period there had also been a change in the way curriculum was governed and managed, with it becoming more directly and visibly part of the discussion of government and Education Ministers rather than education departments or simply devolved to schools – and this process has subsequently intensified with the work, management and political and media debates relating to ACARA and the 'Australian curriculum' that is now being developed.

The second (and currently ongoing) research project, is called *Knowledge Building in Schooling and Higher Education: policy strategies and effects*². It is taking a closer study of the understandings of 'knowledge' evident in history and physics, two of the longstanding foundation school subjects and university disciplines, given the 'knowledge explosion' of the 21st century and the changes to school and university management that form the material context for the work of teachers and academics today. The project is interviewing teachers and academics across three Australian states, at elite and non-elite institutions, and across school, undergraduate and research settings.

Curriculum in the 21st century: the global, the national, the political

While countries have been increasingly drawn into debates set against international standards or criteria (PISA, university rankings and the like) (Karseth and Sivesind 2011; Lingard 2011); and while both schools and universities are increasingly set in a rhetoric of globalization and the global citizen (Rizvi and Lingard 2010), the political anxieties, underpinnings and intents of government curriculum actions relate strongly to the nation, as distinct from individual or global. In the many Australian curriculum policies we examined in the earlier curriculum project, concerns about local (ie national)

¹ DP0771231. See <http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/> and Yates, Collins and O'Connor 2011.

² DP110102466; <http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/kbp/>

unemployment, national economic opportunities and the disappearance off shore of many categories of jobs were a prominent theme. Having more of the population stay at school longer, and do better in examinations, was a theme successfully sold to parents and population as an underpinning of future economic wellbeing. Economic interests are a core reason why 'Australia and Australia's engagement with Asia' is a cross-curriculum priority in the developing national curriculum; and that was explicit in the Issues Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* released by the Australian Government in 2011 as a prelude to a White Paper on this topic (Australia 2011). The reality of global flows and competition is one face of the curriculum agenda here, but attached to it is a concern about *national* economic interest.

The other side of the national concerns with how to rebuild citizenship and affiliations in a new global world is seen in the re-working and new prominence of history and civics curricular in recent times. The forms this re-working has taken can be seen in many countries (Yates and Grumet 2011), but is particularly explicit in Australia. History was one of the four priority subjects for the new national curriculum developed in Australia and there was a great deal of political and media attention to how it would tell the story of Australia and the story of Australia in relation to the world. The curriculum, originally a national artefact, is now firmly positioned in a world of much more porous borders, and aiming to produce 'global citizens' who can flourish in that world. But it also aims to produce some degree of patriotism and identification with the nation, both for purposes of social integration, and as a further support to the national economic agenda.

To sum up then, the concern with 'global' changes has produced nationally a high attention to international assessment and rankings, what Karseth and Sivesind have called 'an assessment-led curriculum' (skills-oriented, content less visible); and it has also produced a concern to better build national identity and affiliation as well as an (economically) well functioning global citizen (content heavy, process of producing identification less visible).

Alongside that, in terms of the forms in which curriculum is being managed, education in Australia became a higher plank on the national government's political agenda. In the 1990s, one aspiring Prime Minister had refused to take on the portfolio of Education as too low ranking; in 2006 another aspiring Deputy Prime Minister chose the Education portfolio rather than the traditional one of Treasury as her platform and stepping stone to the leadership. From the 1980s on, state governments in Australia developed new authorities to govern education which were more directly under ministerial control (Yates, Collins and O'Connor, 2011). And both the political and media debates since the 1980s, and the approach taken currently by the new national curriculum authority, ACARA, aim to invite public and community opinion more widely into the curriculum discussion.

Knowledge, identity and the purposes of schools

For the current paper it is not possible to elaborate in any detail the way in which my current projects are in dialogue with the work of some of my fellow panellists, but in the arguments that follow it will be evident that like them, my work is framed by an interest in the epistemic role of schools and what is happening to that in current times; but that I think identity-formation is also part of the traditional and appropriate role of schools as institutions (Yates 2012), and is also inherent in questions about social change, knowledge, and the disciplines as well as individual learning and motivation. (See, for example Yates 1986, 2009; Clegg 2011). That is, identity is not just part of the pedagogy questions. As those who have studied gender seriously will recognize, the selection of content and 'messages' of school is an important part of what is transmitted to students. The epistemic issues and questions about powerful knowledge and about distinguishing the specific role of schools from broader socialization are important, but without attention to social change and the

limits today of the 'curriculum of the past', the curriculum is likely to be both inadequate and highly socially conservative.

Capacity Building in Australia: some emerging problems

As I indicated earlier, some of the directions evident in the changing forms of curriculum policy in Australia over recent decades have been the increasing concern about competitiveness in the changing global world, the focus on assessment, and the higher visibility of curriculum as part of political and public discourse. In this second part of the paper I want to show some emerging issues, where the forms of this management of curriculum may work against the desired goals of the policy arena.

Problem 1: Market orientation in association with new public management encourages short-term goals that can work against longer term capacity

In the past year, Australia's Chief Scientist has been speaking at length about his concern about the declining numbers of students taking senior science and university physics.

Since the 1990s these [student] choices have translated into a decline in the popularity of a major in mathematics, physics and chemistry (the enabling sciences). By 2010, for students enrolled in a BSc or similar degree, only 13.0% of teaching at the second and third year levels was in mathematics, 10.0% was in chemistry, and 5% was in physics [...] important disciplines may be at risk simply because they are not popular right now

if fewer students enroll in an area, less Commonwealth funding is allocated to it. Less funding means fewer staff (eventually). Fewer staff means less research and less innovation. Less research will mean fewer PhD candidates (the discipline of Statistics as coded by universities is down to fewer than 40 EFTSL). Fewer PhD graduates will mean fewer staff, and that will mean fewer students and less research and less innovation. And all that adds up to a reduction in capacity – and the trigger was a decline in undergraduate numbers – as they exercise their undisputed right to choose what they want to study

[Chief Scientist, National Press Club speech 23.5.12]

He sees this as a problem of potential decline in Australia's skill capacity

We need to ensure that we have the right skill sets in Australia. And we should not expect to be able just to go and buy them when we realise we need them. The 'market' is likely to be fierce in both price and competitiveness.

(Chief Scientist, National Press Club speech 23.5.12)

Education has been drawn in as part of the economic agenda; market choice and competition has been seen as a good model for schools and universities; and assessment and rankings have acquired high visibility as the ways in the public can assess whether good things are being achieved by school or by individuals. The numbers are a proxy for the thing itself (the education or learning that they ostensibly measure). But one effect of this is not just that the things that are measured begin to occupy all the space in the curriculum; and not just that too much time is being spent on things that can be measured, but that students too see the 'measurement by numbers' rather than substantive agendas, as the things they should orient to. In interviews from my current research project, there is some evidence that this is happening in two ways: in senior years students focus on the game (which subject choices maximize university entrance score), and focus on the short-term pay-off (the connection between a subject and its immediate rewards, whether that is competition for university entry, or employment opportunities) – in both cases, at least in the current Australian context (this is an empirical consequence rather than an inevitable one) the result is the declining numbers of students doing the basic sciences:

Girls are um, quite strategic in their subject choices and they tend to be looking for advice about academic success more than um, about foundations of knowledge sort of argument...

[female Physics teacher PPJV, Catholic girls' school, 21.11.11]

The Chief Scientist's solution is to make the 'usefulness' of science more evident, but to some extent the focus on external visible usefulness may be part of the problem. Another physics teacher says this:

Everything is driven by careers. And there's this overwhelming—even though my best students, you know, I was talking to some of them, they go, "Oh, I want to do commerce," and I'm going, "Why commerce? Why?" and it's all driven by money and if that's the case then you know, where is physics or science education you know, until that's sort of rectified and you know, there is a change in the thinking about what education is, especially at university level, well that's just turning into just pump out people for job factories. Until that changes then you know, I think all these hard sciences are going and finding it really difficult to recruit the best people and there's some good people out there who should be doing that sort of stuff and aren't because, you know. Their thinking is well, you know, I'm driven by cash and I need to have money so I can live and you know, I have this expectation and so on and so on so, you know, that post-war and you know, that was back in the time, post-war, heaps of people were doing sciences because (a) it was interesting and (b) there was you know, the wage disparity wasn't as huge between science and other workplaces but that's just changed, you know. You can become a gambler and call yourself a derivatives trader and make a hell of a lot more money.

(PSJV 6.12.11. Female, govt girls school) [p12]

The global audit-led competitive agenda aims to produce greater economic capacity but produces types of short-term focus that may undermine this very purpose. (A similar issue has been raised in relation to Higher Education, in a recent *New Yorker* article about Stanford (Auletta 2012).

Problem 2: The form of Curriculum as public/political discourse can produce both emptying and over-loading of substantive content.

In Australia, as in many countries, new forms of national testing have been introduced in the wake of the PISA-led agendas. These tests (NAPLAN) give a lot of priority to numeracy and literacy, rather than other areas of the curriculum, and in that sense drive out other areas in terms of 'the basics'. But the focus more generally on assessment numbers as the proxies of how well schools are educating, does produce a drive to focus on learning for the examination, and again one of the teachers we interviewed talks about how this re-shapes what the subject becomes:

We start to put all that stuff in place for the 7s and 8s, you know, it's all about clear tasks sheets that can be hooked up with clear rubrics, di, da, di, and the other thing that the school is very concerned about is being able to gather data about the individual students effectively so as to be able to track their progress and basically be ahead of the game in terms of noticing if a student's falling off or anything like that. So that's what that's sort of—that's the framework in which all that is working. Um, I mean the overall aim I think you know, the school has had—this is the 4th year of this current principal and she you know, has a quite clear—she wants the school to be a leader into the 21st century. She wants us not to be following. She wants us to be out ahead. So she's very concerned with what is the cutting edge educational research; she wants everything to be based as much on empirically sort of sound bases as possible and she wants—she's looking for us to pursue to improve that and to also raise the level of academic rigour in the school as much as possible. [p8]

we've been quite explicit in thinking about the position of the My Schools Website and how that impacts on parental um, perception and how we might respond to that [p9]

This teacher argues that the form of learning they are putting in place to maximize the school's scores in examinations and other audits both works against passion for the subject (one of the big themes of university physics academics), and leads to students not retaining what they do learn in more junior years into the senior years.

A second problem with a curriculum that is being developed as an arm of politicians and their platforms is the tendency to overload the promises. The documents are now not just speaking to

teachers but are part of the accountability agenda, open to criticisms from all sides on which elements of history are getting too much or too little attention; whether all the science topics have been covered; whether there is too much or too little social implications of science etc. One of the most common criticisms from teachers about the new curriculum about to be trialled is not about its basic form, but simply about the 'too much' issue. For example

Just ridiculous amounts of content. I mean, (sighs) let's concentrate on a few things and really get to understand it. Look, I just find that there's no time for the students to play around with experiments.

Physics teacher PSJV 61211 transcript 5 [p10]

This I would argue cannot just be set aside as an argument about pedagogy, but is also about curriculum. Is 'physics' what is able to be remembered for an examination and then forgotten, or is it about being able to 'do' physics in some way?. In the current research project, one of the aims of the interviews with physicists and historians at all levels is to elicit their sense of what is actually central to these disciplines.

This criticism of content overload is even more prominent in Australia in relation to the history curriculum, where there has been a prolonged public debate about the story that should be told about Australia and Australian identity ('black armband' vs celebration etc) and where there is also an apparent stronger divergence between on the one hand the view of 'the public' and of politicians of what school history is about (ie the messages or story it tells), and why it is there, and that of teachers and professional historians (what historical knowledge work is about).

So in this section I want to draw attention to the fact that the incorporation of schooling into a government's more general discourse of achievement, and into public comment on details of the curriculum for different levels of schooling, has an effect of a reading of texts separated off from a sense of students and the subject – that is it can empty out content in favour of the assessment scores, or it can overload the aspirations about the details that students should learn – or do both simultaneously.

Problem 3: Concerns about citizenship, social integration and national identity are in tension with the 'standards' agendas

In the work on the World Yearbook (Yates and Grumet 2011) we found in many countries recent times had produced not just a stronger recognition of the need to prepare students for a globally mobile and competitive world, but a concern to rebuild national identities and affiliations in the face of that. This is certainly seen in Australia where there has been a prolonged public debate about giving greater priority to the history curriculum, and defining what story it is to tell about who Australians are and how Australian history is to be told relative in the context of the world – the relative emphasis to Europe, Asia and the like. But this directive to regroup is potentially weakened by two other elements of the contemporary policy agenda.

One area that may undermine this concern is the obsession with assessment and international comparison outlined above. The league tables are in principle non national-centric, and the emphasis being given to these is leading to a lot more interest in non nation-centred curricula such as the IB.

The second problem relates to the content overloading that results from a public scrutiny of the curriculum texts in a democracy where there will be a very wide range of concerns about what should be included. This direction fails to take account of the large body of work on subjectivity, school resistance, the hidden curriculum and the like. In democratic societies, being too heavily handed on the story being told about who you are as a citizen is likely to produce lack of interest and resistance.

Here are some comments from a history teacher in an interview from my current project about the new Australian history curriculum that is about to be trialled.

I think that with all of the money that the government's throwing into publications and things that arrive that we all just toss in the bin, they could be devote—and all of the money that goes into publicising the um, you know, Remembrance Day and all of those things, vast amounts of money and it makes me so cross, you know. We don't need posters every year for Remembrance Day and we get all of these packs all the time that arrive that—look, they're great, but we don't use them, and I just file them away. We've got all our resources and we're very well resourced and you know, all of the online resources for the, from the National War Memorial and all that sort of thing. And that money could be going into the National History Challenge. [A more topic-open project based approach run by the National History Teachers of Aus, and the state assoc, and co-ordinated by volunteers who are usually history teachers who work hundreds of unpaid hours.]

(History teacher HPSV 21.11.11)

She goes on

I fear with the national curriculum that we're going to see the demise of history in this country for a generation. [...]they can choose a history elective in Year 11 and what is it? Australian content, World War I, which they've done in Year 10 and at the end of Year 9 well, And they've done it in Grade 6. So they do it three times. And it's mandatory every single time, they can't avoid it. Well..

And she gets quite heated:

when the government gets its hands on the curricula, it becomes politicised and in the worst case scenarios, it becomes propagandised and you know, it's a feature of the totalitarian state, quite frankly.

Another history teacher emphasizes the problem of not disconnecting what is taught from thinking about students:

Like another part in the national curriculum is the industrialisation of England and it's interesting - but I can say that now, but I don't think at 15 I would have found it all that interesting. So it is a matter of picking the best bits of history or the most, the bits that we'll, that they'll enjoy, it's the people writing the curriculum, they might find it interesting, but put yourself in the shoes of someone who's 14, having to learn about factories being built in England

(history teacher HSJV 23.11.11)

(I am aware that some of these quotes may be interpreted as reflecting an orientation to students at the expense of 'the discipline' of a kind that Young, Muller, Bernstein have criticized, but I think this is an incorrect interpretation, but that requires a discussion in its own right.)

Summing up re Curriculum and Capacity building – some tensions:

To conclude, the points I have been making in this paper are these:

1. The emphasis on international comparisons and and a measurement and examinations culture feeds its way into a short-term instrumental orientation both of schools and of students, and is potentially seen in the reduction in numbers choosing the 'enabling sciences'.
2. Making curriculum policy overtly part of a political and public community discussion is producing the effects of both an emptying out of content (NAPLAN) and an over-loading of content (in subject curricula) that potentially work against strong understandings (knowledge-building) being developed over the years of schooling.
3. 'Capacity' includes motivation and affiliation, and national governments are trying to rebuild the latter (both commitment to national economic flourishing, and to social integration as a national as well as world citizen), but the forms in which curriculum is being managed takes curriculum texts too much at face value, detached from teachers' experience and previous work on the hidden curriculum and how students read and resist prescribed messages.

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