

## **Educational filters: Will a national curriculum change what teachers teach?**

(The following article contains an abridged version of the Conference Dinner address by John Gore, Education Consultant, at the 2009 TCNSW Conference on the National Curriculum.)

The arguments for a national curriculum are strong but there remain some challenges. In this paper I will look at some of the filters that occur in both the construction of the national curriculum and its implementation under three headings: Political, Bureaucratic and School and then to look at a couple of issues that national curriculum might be posing for Christians.

Filters allow some things to pass while other things are captured and removed. In relation to the national curriculum I am using the term filter to refer to the people and organisations that influence what is included and what is excluded.

### **Political filters**

- Political agreement between states

Currently all state and territory governments, except for Western Australia, are Labour. Although the present structures involving COAG (Coalition of Australian Governments) is stronger than 1994, there remains a possible threat for national curriculum because of changes in state governments as was evidenced in 1994 when new state governments in Victoria and Western Australia would not support the statements and profiles.

For example, the NSW Government is not travelling too well, and who knows what attitude a Liberal-National NSW government might take to an agenda it will claim they never were part of, and have no commitment to? With a strong NSW Board of Studies it could well go it alone and reject implementation or simply absorb what it wants of the national curriculum and maintain NSW syllabuses, something that the current Labour government may yet decide to do.

- Testing

Teachers should be clear that one agenda behind a national curriculum is national testing so that state ministers and the Commonwealth can know if students getting better and how do they compare with other states.

Here in NSW, there is current controversy over the publication of results that might lead to leagues tables. This could easily become a national discussion related to the proposed national curriculum. We can be sure that the testing agenda will be a major filter to national curriculum. Unless the broad curriculum outcomes are tested, teachers will teach a reduced version to suit examination specifications.

### **Bureaucratic filters**

- Boards of studies in some states are unlikely to support a curriculum exercise that is seen to be in their territory, but will need to comply with their state government's wishes. Given that the proposed national curriculum looks a lot like the NSW curriculum, the NSW Board might only decide to make adjustments to existing syllabuses.

From its beginnings in 1990, the NSW Board has pursued a rigorous curriculum with explicit content. This explicitness has advantaged NSW in the existing national testing program.

- Departments of education

Education departments implement the policies of the government of the day. With the unanimous agreement of states, some curriculum officers will be involved in the construction of the national curriculum, a lot of it behind the scenes. Their views and the views of Boards of Studies officers will direct a lot of the detail. They too will be a filter in development.

- Universities, Non-government school systems and Lobby groups

Some specialists and educators in universities will take interest in this work and will both submit papers and go public about their particular concerns, and depending on their media profile, political clout and ability to win community support, their views will need to be accommodated.

Other players include the non-government schools represented by the Catholic Church and the Associations of Independent Schools.

### School filters

- Subject professional teacher groups are likely to have a significant impact on the content of the curriculum documents. Many of their members will be involved in writing and the associations can muster campaigns against any elements that they believe are not in the best interest of their teachers.
- Teacher unions represent a major threat to the national curriculum, but not directly. They are unlikely to significantly influence the development, but will seek to lever resource support for implementation and to oppose aspects of national testing. There may yet be changes to accommodate their views.
- Teachers represent the ultimate filter. They take curriculum documents and translate them into teaching and learning activities. Their ability to do this will be determined by their understanding of the curriculum, their teaching skills and the testing program. If they are unhappy with the curriculum, they will create and find their own variations, they always have.

So the development of national curriculum is multifaceted and there are many players who will all be trying to get the inclusions and exclusions they want.

In the midst of this activity, what sort of national curriculum should Christians be supporting? What inclusions do they want?

Today, I only have time to look at two areas and locate them within Christian beliefs.

### A comprehensive curriculum - the question of breadth.

Christians believe in a transcendent (beyond this world) God who is the creator and Sustainer of the universe. This belief demands the study of God's creation through the sciences and mathematics in the anticipation that God can be known through his creation. Science helps to understand how the world was created while religion answers a different question - who created it? Christians should not be wary of science. It is never going to discover anything contrary to the nature of the Creator. Concerns amongst some Christians about evolution and the need to promote *creationism* and *intelligent design* are misplaced, as these arguments are based on an inadequate understanding of God, reducing him to a God of the gaps, where what science has not yet been able to completely answer, is assigned to God. Science is a godly study because it continues to reveal the creator so that we can marvel at his work. So for Christians, God is huge and somewhat unimaginable. Science and mathematics are important studies for Christians to know this creator God.

Christians also believe in an interventionist God who operates in the world and throughout history seeking to know and communicate with his human creation. For Christians, the study of English and other languages is important to be able to know and communicate with God and with each other. History becomes an essential study to know how humans have developed and what their relationship with God has been. The natural environment, while studied in science, is also impacted on by humans and so the study of Geography also becomes important to Christians as stewards of God's creation.

In these arguments, it would seem that the national curriculum has got it right. But there is more. Truth is not limited to this batch of subjects. The Arts play an important role in developing human creativity and in knowing God. Knowledge of the truth is not limited to scientific knowledge; truth is also apprehended by feeling, aesthetic appreciation and through trust. Reasoning and analysis alone are not sufficient to know the truth and to comprehend God. All subjects in the curriculum can assist in this matter and it is good to see that new proposals for national curriculum include The Arts and that further consideration will be given to what might be considered to be the whole curriculum for inclusion.

God is also relational and the object of a Christian life is to know God and not only know about him. The Christian life is expressed in loving God and one's neighbour. Jesus' definition of neighbour in the parable of the Good Samaritan makes this a daunting mission and demands an understanding of our neighbour. Studies in history and geography are essential and, it is good that a strong civics and citizenship focus is to be implemented, but for a curriculum that trumpets a future perspective, the lack of focus on the peoples and cultures of the world and a capacity to examine current events seem obvious omissions. Christians want to understand their neighbour, history and geography will greatly assist, but are not adequate to complete this outcome.

Christians believe in stewardship of the resources God has given them. They would want to see financial literacy in the curriculum, but it is totally omitted from the mathematics curriculum. They are also concerned to look after their bodies. Where is health and physical education in the national curriculum at a time when studies show obesity increasing at an alarming rate across the Australian community?

So the national curriculum as currently conceived is selective. Filtering has already occurred. Who selected these subjects and under what advise. These matters need to still be addressed if the whole curriculum is to be the subject of this exercise in national curriculum.

If these national curriculum subjects are limited to the current selection, in schools they will grow in stature and assume a disproportionate amount of time crowding out other studies. Christians need to support an agenda for a breadth of study and expansion of the national curriculum. The testing program must also be inclusive to not infer a different status to some subjects than others.

The national curriculum intends to be inclusive. It will have gender, Aboriginal and multicultural perspectives. While these broad perspectives are welcome, I want to challenge the inclusiveness of this curriculum and its honesty. Yes, I have introduced a values word - honesty. I have done that on purpose to remind everyone that what is included and what is excluded depends on the values of the people proposing inclusion or exclusion.

Many would be aware that amongst Australian historians there has been an ongoing debate about the accuracy of Australian history as written by some of our most distinguished historians. The issue is how our historians have dealt with religious influences in the development of Australia. This is not primarily about religion, but about the recognition of how the beliefs of people and organisations have moulded Australia. It is not about Christian beliefs only, but about the approach that has been taken to the writing of history from authors who have secular beliefs with little interest in religion. Students are taught from and read this history and come to a view that Australia has always been a mainly secular society like it is today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Australia has developed on the back of people and groups with deep religious convictions. Their motivations for their actions are often found in their relationship with their god and many authors have preferred, because of their own bias, to emphasise the deeds of these people and organisations and to ignore their motivations. Young people are developing a

perspective on Australian history that is not accurate and can be found wanting by testing it against a wider body of literature and original documents.

The latest version of the national curriculum continues to ignore this point of view by not including in the curriculum, where appropriate, religious influences. The Consultation Report acknowledges that “religious influences” were requested as additional content, but none of the listed “actions” require any inclusion of this matter and the new Framing Paper has just one mention of religious influences in one topic. It appears that the Board has taken sides with the secularists and excluded religious influences from the history curriculum. I am not sure where they are getting their advice from, but it is not balanced.

The Board does not appear to recognise the issue, its documents do not include this matter and Christians will need to continue to fight to have an honest approach to Australian history rather than the current one.

Let me give you an example of a desired approach: As a teacher about to teach social groups that have provided welfare for the Australian community as part of civics within the history curriculum, you chose the Salvos. Do you teach about the work they do - yes? Do you teach the history of the organisation - maybe? Do you teach about the beliefs that motivate these people to do this work - unlikely? Yet understanding the Salvos, and much of the social work done in this country, surely involves all three. An honest approach to understanding the Salvos demands all three. This is what Christians are asking that, where appropriate, the religious influences become explicit.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Christians need to understand the political processes of development and implementation of a national curriculum and stakeholders and their position on many of the issues. The national curriculum can be welcomed by Christians who are seeking breadth and depth of study in acknowledgement that such studies help to reveal and know about God and support further expansion to the full curriculum. They also need to come to grips with the debate about the nature of Australian history and see that the national curriculum is honest in its approach and not given over to secular interests.

John Gore