

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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A Contribution to the Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum

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I am a registered high school teacher in NSW, have been a teacher for over 15 years, and am a PhD candidate in a Faculty of Education. About 25 years ago when I was in high school the curriculum was then undergoing review just as it is now, with one of the terms of reference being overcrowding and a ‘return to fundamentals’. An older teacher explained to me that he had seen a few oscillations of curriculum review, as over time a focus on fundamentals and scaling back on details creates a desire for more particulars, and then back again. Thus are the vicissitudes of curriculum reform.

Having said that, I support Term 2(a), to address the overcrowding of the curriculum; there is usually very little time to delve deep into any given outcome as there are so many to get through. This is just part of the hectic scheduling of schooling as teachers have been increasingly burdened with low impact, time-consuming administrative tasks and other minutiae. However, easing off of prescriptive details is not enough. Teaching as a profession needs to be accorded trust and respect so that teachers are free to flesh out the details of big ideas that are appropriate to their environment and the individual students and classes they engage with on a daily basis. Doing so will help address Terms 1(a) and (c).

In terms of big ideas, I believe Term 3(a), about the cross-curriculum priorities, is important and appropriate to circumstances of today in guiding classroom content and teaching, especially Sustainability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures. These two are related in that, as is well known, Aboriginal people have managed this land sustainably for at least 65,000 years (Clarkson et al., 2017) – something we would do well to understand – and would help address Term 3(d). But some research shows that broad, interdisciplinary topics are better taught as individual subjects, rather than spread out over many (Knapp, 2000, p. 36), and I find it worrying that sustainability was removed as a priority from the new Alice Springs policy document.

According to the ecological footprint, which is the broadest metric available for measuring our resource and waste budget, Australia is one of the few countries in the world which still [has](#)

excess bio-capacity. Yet our ecological footprint per capita is one of the highest in the world and our penchant for economic and population growth is eroding our natural resource base. This has been the finding, raised with increasing alarm, of all of the *Australia: State of the Environment* reports (2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2006; Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2001; Jackson et al., 2017; State of the Environment 2011 Committee, 2011; State of the Environment Advisory Council, 1996). These are the most comprehensive accounts of the state of the Australian environment that I am aware of. Evidently, now is not the time to remove sustainability as a cross-curriculum priority, nor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture, but to elevate their importance by making them their own stand-alone subject in schools.

To address Term 3(c) and draw on the social consequences of the longstanding policy of economic growth, we would do well to note that according to the World Happiness Report 2019, while Australia had experienced uninterrupted economic growth for about a quarter century, this did not result in an increase in Australians' happiness from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2019, p. 35). If anything there was a slight decrease. This disjuncture between economic growth and increases in human happiness, a long assumed relationship central to economic theory, has been known for decades and is called the Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin, 1974, 2013; Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Smith Zweig, 2010), yet it deserves to be more widely known, especially among policy makers. In short, not only is growth unsustainable and it wrecks the environment, it also yields no long-term increases in happiness and wellbeing.

I would entreat you as policy makers and fellow citizens whose progeny will also inherit this land long after we are all gone, to weigh the suggestions and reasoned evidence I have shared in reviewing the NSW curriculum and in any changes made to it.

Thanks for your time and consideration. This submission can be made public in full with my name on it.

Sincerely,

Jason van Tol

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