

## **INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

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## RESPONSE TO THE NSW CURRICULUM REVIEW 2020

Dear Curriculum Review Committee,

Thank you for your work and for this opportunity. There are aspects of the NSW response that are commendable, other aspects that are a matter of (philosophical) opinion (some may call this unspoken ideologies), and other aspects that I believe need challenging.

I seek to briefly highlight two of the latter, with the offer to explain further if that would be considered helpful:

- a. Unspoken pedagogical assumptions; and
- b. Forgotten existing structural opportunities.

### A. UNSPOKEN PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The 2014 Review of the National Curriculum outlined clearly how philosophical underpinnings can lead to different emphases in educational practice. Chapter 1 of this report is an excellent overview of this dynamic.

One of the aspects of contemporary education in Australia highlighted in the review (p.30) is the tension that arises from an over-emphasis on 'processes' (e.g. "21<sup>st</sup> Century education") in contrast to sequential core knowledge:

Unlike generic capabilities or so-called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are artificially linked to the curriculum and that add to an already overcrowded situation, the values and dispositions associated with a liberal–humanist view of education arise naturally as a critical aspect of the various disciplines.

Those critical of a liberal–humanist view of education often characterise it as conservative and irrelevant to contemporary schools and classrooms. Of interest is that the radical English educationalist, MFD Young, also stresses the importance of a knowledge-based curriculum when he argues, after noting recent developments in England, that:

*many current policies almost systematically neglect or marginalise the question of knowledge. The emphasis is invariably on learners, their different styles of learning and their interests, on measurable learning outcomes and competencies and making the curriculum relevant to their experience and their future employability – knowledge is taken for granted or something we can make fit our political goals.<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, E.D Hirsch (*Why Knowledge Matters* 2019) notes:

- A substantive and coherent elementary curriculum that builds the factual and conceptual knowledge of all students during the seven years from preschool through grade five and then beyond is the most effective way to ensure competent verbal abilities in grades six through twelve. [p.90]
- In the highest scoring nations [PISA] the year-to-year curriculum topics are known to all – students, teachers and parents. [p.94]

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<sup>1</sup> Young, MFD 2010, *Curriculum for a Knowledge Society: Lessons from the sociology of knowledge*, Hood Lecture, delivered at the University of Auckland.

These pedagogical issues relate to the NSW response because when it notes the need to identify “essential facts, concepts and principles”, the issue of how this will be taught is left unstated.

I submit that if our young people are not taught coherent essential core knowledge in the early years, then we will continue to slide in our PISA results. Such a shift would require revision of the current emphasis of teaching ‘essentials’ through generic skills rather than a known publicly available and coherent knowledge based curriculum, particularly across the Junior and Middle school years.

Against alarmist response that foreshadows dryness in such teaching, I again quote Hirsch:

- The claims that a knowledge -based school is defined by “rote learning of mere facts”, that it is “purely verbal, not hands on”, that it is “developmentally inappropriate” – these are all untrue caricatures of the real thing... [they] are lively places. Children are intensely interested in grown-up knowledge. [p. 163]

This unspoken pedagogical dynamic also relates to further sections of the Review – “Excellent Ongoing Progress” and also “Building Strong Foundations”.

I also note that it is students from disadvantaged groups (like our Indigenous students) who have most to lose if such “community core curriculum” is not developed through the processes outlined in the Response to the Review. As Hirsch demonstrated:

- Cultural essentialism is tribalism... Though well meant, romantic multiculturalism needs to be revised and transformed so it doesn’t perpetuate the economic exclusion of those who have not mastered the shared knowledge required by effective reading, writing, speaking and listening. [p.129]

Indigenous leaders such as Warren Mundine and Jacinta Price agree with this need:

*Many Indigenous Australians have achieved success. But as Anthony Dillon points out, it has been mostly been achieved by following the same path as successful Non-Indigenous Australians: do not isolate yourself from society; offer others respect and treat them as equals; engage in learning (whether it be formal or informal); make valuable contributions to the community in which you live; aspire to be a role model for others; and adhere to a personal moral code.*

[From <https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/articles/reconciliation-means-shared-ways-forward/> ]

## B. FORGOTTEN EXISTING STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

The “Later Years” section of the Response to the Review seems to not distinguish between ATAR based HSC processes and non-ATAR based processes. The system in Stage 6 already provides for students to study and complete a Certificate III (or IV) plus English for a non-ATAR HSC. This can gain employment opportunities and / or ATAR equivalent entries to a number of universities. Why is this not recognised and why aren’t plans being developed to help schools do transitional planning to grow this option that already exists?

*Stephen J Fyson*