

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 21a**

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

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REVIEW OF THE NSW SCHOOL CURRICULUM: CHAIR'S DISCUSSION PAPER, October 2020

*Response and Reflections, by Stephen J Fyson PhD*

Item 1: The Problem in NSW Schools

1. *Post-modernism* – agreed. This has given rise to a dramatic loss of relational confidence which is necessary for a strong school community focused on learning. It has done this by promoting an unbridled individualism based on relativistic 'emotivism'. This has also, ironically, promoted the 'myth of neutrality' in teaching – it is a myth because all disciplines are used for a purpose ('telos') – and thus have a moral intent. There is currently no safe way to explore this (in State-run schools in particular) because there is no agreed ground-rules on the basis of moral conduct. In contrast to this surrender to politically correct values in our schools, Professor Emeritus Brian Hill from Western Australia did some seminal work in developing a framework to help education sectors deal with values with transparency and coherency.
2. *Need for meritocracy* – agreed. As per the above, I see that the foundations for universal respect (all human beings are fully human beings) has been eroded because of the introduction of identity politics that pervade the nature of relational parameters in too many schools.
3. *Political contextualization is increasing* – agreed. And I suggest it is because there are not the common values as indicated in (1) above. When that common base weakens, then something fills the vacuum. It is impossible to be 'neutral' per se; but a community that is not weakening affirms (in straight and creative ways) their values, their history, and meaningfulness.
4. *Weakening of Western Values* – agreed. There has never been an appropriate response to the clearly structured and coherent review by Dr.'s Donnelly and Wiltshire on this difficulty. This point speaks to the issues raised in points 1 to 3 above.
5. *Wellbeing programs* – agreed about the need to contextualise better. As a former registered psychologist, I see that the *purpose* of wellbeing has shifted towards the 'three untruths' that Lukianoff and Haidt describe in the *Coddling of the American Mind*. The older purpose was to know students better to teach them better, not to reinforce emotivist self-esteem decision making.
6. *Instructional models* – agreed that these are driven by 'pop psychology' that becomes 'pop education'. Learning styles is a classic example. The work of ED Hirsch (*Why Knowledge Matters*) is a clear clarion call on this matter.
7. *Better Knowledge Based Curriculum structures* – agreed - as per the comments about the research by Hirsch above.

Item 2: What's Missing from Masters

1. *Reversing the Decline* – agreed. I suggest that a critical part of acting on the Chair's concerns is with the NESA accreditation process of degrees for tertiary institutions. Without that being reviewed, colleges and institutions will continue to train teachers the way they are currently being trained. For example, does the Chair know that a Bachelor of Education can take up to 800 pages for their submission? I recommend viewing the form "Priority Area Elaborations - Template 3A" (which alone can run to 30 pages) that ensures that the politically correct focus areas are over-played, leaving too little time to cover the areas outlined by the Chair. The

website where the regulations and templates are publicly available is:

<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/teacher-accreditation/teaching-qualifications/initial-teacher-education-providers/get-a-program-accredited>

2. *Teachers lifting student results* – I suggest that the results reported by CESE do not correspond with what NESAs focusses on in approving Teacher Training degrees. Note – the language of CESE is there in part (because of the general Australian Professional Standards for Teachers), but the emphasis can often be in other places. That is why in some degrees, a Primary school trainee teacher may not do a foundational subject about classroom management, which of course, will 'make or break' their teaching (and I base that comment on being a senior school leader – including principalships – for decades).
3. *Untimed Syllabuses* – my suspicion is that Masters has been able to suggest this because teachers, in some ways, are already operating in this manner. That is, students who are not achieving well are progressed, and teachers are then expected to 'differentiate' or 'adjust' their programs to include all the different levels in their class. I go back to Hirsch's research about 'closing the gap' in the primary years as a much more coherent strategy.
4. *Ability, competitive spirit, work ethic and quality teaching* – agreed. It appears that we cannot focus freely on ability because "identity" as a frame of reference is a more dominant. We cannot focus on competition, because 'safteyism' (Lukianoff and Haidt) is more dominant. We cannot focus on work ethic because socially contextualized identity is more dominant. We cannot focus on quality teaching, because no matter how much support is given, there is no strong culture of 'performance review'. Instead, some watery egalitarianism ensures a poor teacher can progress to about \$100,000 after a 4 year degree and 8 years of teaching without any extra responsibilities or pattern of strong teaching.
5. *Theory and Practice in subjects – vocational training* – agreed. There is already the means to do this in helpful format, but it is not prioritized in the training or enculturation of teachers. The unions also protect the status quo and do not encourage alternative structure in schools, because of its ultra-conservatism in protecting the existing roles of teachers. As well as the example in the Chair's paper, another recent one is the "Business Hub" at SPCC Cessnock.
6. *National Curriculum* – agreed – see the comments above about Wiltshire and Donnelly, and NESAs part in degree accreditation. It is also suggested that TESQA's role can impede innovation in tertiary education (note the issues raised by Senator Amanda Stoker with TESQA). For example, making the previous "Grad Dip Ed" into an "M Teach" did nothing to improve the upskilling of teaching, because it did not increase dramatically the amount of time teachers spent learning about classrooms and productive teaching. It increased the amount of academic time reflecting on theoretical issues, where 'practical issues' are disguised in 'reflective practitioner' research projects.
7. *Decluttering the Curriculum* – agreed. Despite the platitudes about content, what is often meant (as per the outcome statements in syllabi) is time for process learning. Also, there is no obvious commitment to reduce the repetitious and wasteful time on "Priority Area Elaborations".
8. *Teacher Flexibility* – agreed about the wisdom of teaching from a 'certified menu of programs and practices proven to be beneficial' – but this needs to be introduced in training, apprenticed in the early years, supported later on, and have accountability introduced.

9. *Schools and Parents* – agreed. I see a tendency in Australia comparable to other nations where the belief that ‘the State owns the child’ is becoming more dominant. Parents have prime responsibility for their children, but this message is confused in our society because:
  - a. *State engineering* – the State increasingly believes that teaching students to *know about* subjects will shape them into their centralized vision of compliant citizenship. Yet, following Bourke, it is the ‘little platoons’ of life where we can properly learn to *care about* that which is important to humanity. Schools are to partner parents, not engineer or force parents;
  - b. *Industry pressure* – the belief that every man and woman should be in the workforce all their lives runs counter to developing the community-building ‘little platoons’ of life, and leads to:
  - c. *Professionalization and Politicization* of child raising
10. *Downplayed Policy Directions* – agreed, particularly about abolishing the three Cross-Curriculum Priorities, which are as distracting in terms of valuable teaching time of strong subject knowledge. The same can be said of the built-in redundancy that occurs in teaching time because of a preoccupation with the Priority Areas.
11. *Countering Post-modernism* – agreed, and the examples are well put as representations. This is in accord with Donnelly and Wiltshire (2014).

### Item 3: Conclusion

The conclusions in the Chair's paper are coherent and well-founded as per his review, and I support them.

I would suggest that there are two foundational assumptions in the Masters review that drive the difficulties identified by the Chair:

1. The thinking that is presented in the Masters review is shallow. What made the Donnelly and Wiltshire (2014) review much stronger was their commitment to outline the ‘received philosophies’ driving the National Curriculum, which is both an outworking of and driver of teaching practice in Australia; and
2. The applicability of the review by Masters is impractical. This is the irony – by not testing the assumptions behind the opinions, the Masters review is too often out-of-touch with the realities of schools in NSW.

I thank the Chair for his unswerving commitment to answer the question, “Why are we declining educationally despite the increase in tax-payer funding?” I also appreciate the central role of the home that the Chair emphasizes. It is a surprising (and sad) point of difference in our era, because increasingly it seems that those in authority view children as fodder for their social engineering, rather than as precious members of their families and communities, where our humanity grows – and it is a humanity that constantly cries out when treated as animals in the hands of political masters, or machines to be programmed for their ends.

With appreciation,

*Stephen J Fyson PhD*