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Class action

by Julie Hare

Australia anxiously negotiates its first steps towards a common national curriculum, reigniting debate about the teaching of the country's history.

New Zealand's decision to adopt an open, broad and less-prescriptive education curriculum document is symptomatic of an optimistic and confident society. Australia has been heading in the opposite direction.

A generalisation, sure, but Australian public-education advocate Jane Caro, author of *The Stupid Country: How Australia Is Dismantling Public Education*, argues the liberality of a curriculum document has a lot to do with the mood in a society. "If the mood is one of fear, society is going to want to control things because that helps soothe anxieties."

The issue is certainly very much in educationalists' thoughts as Australia negotiates its first steps towards a common national curriculum, an idea first raised under the previous government almost as a continuation of what's known as the History Wars. Former Prime Minister John Howard openly hated revisionist interpretations of Australian history, which view white colonialists as invaders rather than settlers.

"It has become almost de rigueur in intellectual circles to regard Australian history as little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare," opined Australia's openly anti-intellectual PM.

"The Australian Government wants to see a firm place for history in the school curriculum and the re-establishment of a structured narrative in the teaching of Australian history," Howard's federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, told a conference of history teachers in 2006.

In last week's issue of the *Listener*, some principals criticised the new Kiwi curriculum, which they say focuses on how children learn rather than learning facts.

Professor Geoff Masters, CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), says whether curricula are prescriptive or not seems to be forever swinging on an endless pendulum between two extremes.

“When I trained to be a teacher in the early 1970s, it was a tightly specified syllabus that said you will teach A, B and C. At the other end of the spectrum is a broad intention of the sorts of things you want students to learn. Between those extremes is where we are headed in Australia, at least in relation to a [national] curriculum. There will be a clear and explicit statement of intent of what we want kids to know and be able to do.”

Last week, PM Kevin Rudd took another step towards implementing what has been called his “education revolution” by appointing the man who will oversee development of a national school curriculum. Professor Barry McGaw is the former director of education at the OECD in Paris. The national curriculum, to take effect in 2011, will apply from kindergarten to Year 12 and initially cover English, maths, science ... and history.

Until last year, no one had any idea even as to the similarities or differences in the curricula of the eight states and territories. The first step to find out was undertaken by ACER last year when it compared the senior curricula of four subjects: chemistry, physics, advanced mathematics and English.

“We found that it varied hugely from subject to subject,” says Masters. Though some subjects barely resembled each other, chemistry had a 90 percent common content across state and territory systems.

“However, what we don’t know is whether those topics are being taught to the same depth.”

Masters says the new national curriculum will prescribe content. “Within subjects there would be the identification of core content and then there will be room – an expectation – for teachers to identify other areas of their teaching that are tailored for local need and interest.”

This must be music to the ears of the teacher unions, which are notoriously territorial of their individual state systems.

“We don’t have a problem with a national curriculum per se, but it has to take into account some of the flexibilities around what states currently do,” says Steve Ryan,

president of the Queensland Teachers' Union.

Ryan argues that the push by the Howard government – clearly articulated by his Education Minister – toward a prescriptive curriculum is a thing of the past.

Indeed, the Rudd government convincingly swept into power in November on the wings of an “Education Revolution”. How revolutionary it will be remains to be seen (cynics say it will be close to 360 degrees), but certainly the pressure to produce a cleaner, nicer version of Australian history in the syllabus seems to be, temporarily at least, alleviated.

“That teachers have the ability to innovate and introduce new material depending on where students live is important,” says Ryan.

Of course, the ability of teachers to interpret and ad-lib based on local reference points depends very largely on the quality of the teachers at hand.

Teacher supply and quality is one of the most debated topics in recent years. There is a massive bubble of teachers in their late fifties who will retire in the next few years, and large swathes of new teachers leave the profession after five or six years.

“They get browned off by the system or the pressures of the job,” says Ryan.

Pay is part of the problem. Although starting salaries are high by international standards (\$A41,000), once in a public school system teachers earn incremental increases based on time served – not quality of service – for 10 years, when the pay increases stop. General classroom teacher who don't move into an executive, leadership or bureaucratic position can expect to earn the equivalent of around \$A65,000 for the next 30 or more years until they retire.

The Howard government introduced the idea of performance-based pay and a study is looking at whether it could be implemented and what criteria could be applied. Suggestions that teachers be rewarded for increases in national numeracy and literacy testing results are supported by some and ridiculed by others.

The Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the lions of industry, even bought into the debate at the end of the year, decreeing the best teachers should earn double what they currently get.

“How much better would it be if people entering the profession knew that if they performed at the highest level, they would be rewarded accordingly,” BCA president

Michael Chaney told the council's annual dinner. He estimated the annual cost of his plan would be a mere \$A4 billion.

Whether test results in literacy and numeracy would be a successful indicator of teacher quality is up for debate, but testing has been adopted in individual states in the past decade or so, and now the first national testing in spelling, grammar and punctuation for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (schooling ends after Year 12) will take place in May.

"Testing and measurement is fine," says Caro. "But it doesn't solve anything. It just measures things."

Perhaps the move toward increased testing may be similar to, even related to, where Australia is at on the issue of curricula.

"It's almost a rhythm of breathing – from interventionist and prescriptive to interpretive and broad," says Caro.

"Some people have entrenched views one way or the other, but that assumes a right place to be. I suspect there isn't one and the rhythm is the point. Moving in and out is the inevitable way humans try to reach a balance. It's a combination of the two that is probably the best point, but somehow we slip past the sweet spot in either direction."

Julie Hare is editor-in-chief of Education Review, which goes to each of Australia's 10,200 schools.

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