

The 2009 Garth Boomer Memorial Lecture

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Delivered at the biennial conference of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) on Friday October 2, 2009, at the Realm Hotel, Canberra.

Is this a revolution?: A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda

Introduction

It is an honour to be the presenter of a memorial lecture which bears Garth Boomer's name. Garth was one of the great Australian educators of the 20th century and many of his ideas still resonate today. As a South Australian I feel especially proud to have been asked to present this lecture since - as we South Australians don't tire of telling people from other states - Garth was a South Australian. The building in which I work at the Mawson Lakes Campus of the University of South Australia is called the Garth Boomer Building and so everyday I am reminded of his inspiring educational in our state.

At this moment in our history – and for this conference – Garth's presence is with us. He was a great proponent of a national education agenda and indeed of national curriculum conversations, to pinch the title of this conference. As a result, I have chosen my topic for the Garth Boomer Memorial lecture to be an analysis of the national education agenda as it relates to school – that is, what goes under the title of the **'education revolution'**.

What is the Rudd government's national 'education revolution'?

It is nearly two years since the election of the Rudd government, which came to power with one of its central promises being the delivery of an 'education revolution'. Since that time, there has been a lot of activity at the national level, with almost every announcement on education being couched in terms of its contribution to the revolution. To date, however, commentary has tended to focus on specific items of the government's agenda in such arenas as early childhood, school, VET and University education. In this paper I want to take

one of those arenas – school education - and explore the agenda as a whole. In particular, I want to reflect on the extent to which the sum of the Rudd government's education policy can claim to constitute a 'revolution'.

At one level it is easy to dismiss the use of the word 'revolution' as just political spin – rhetoric forged in the heat of political battle – and yet words and concepts employed often enough can, to use Foucault's famous phrase, come to 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). That is, language is not innocent - it shapes and determines ideas and actions. In almost every utterance about education, Prime Minister Rudd and Education Minister Gillard have continued to describe their actions as making a contribution to an 'education revolution' and any proper analysis needs to take these claims seriously. So what do they mean when they use the term?

Using the Merriam-Webster dictionary, one definition of revolution is that it is a 'fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualising something: a change of paradigm' (Merriam-Webster, 2009). If this is accepted then the term 'education revolution' clearly refers to a significant shift in policy and practice in education - orchestrated at the national level and implemented by the States and Territories - which is designed to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

However, another possibility relates to an alternative definition of a revolution as 'a progressive motion of a body around an axis so that any line of the body parallel to the axis returns to its initial position while remaining parallel to the axis in transit and usually at a constant distance from it'. If this is accepted then the term 'education revolution' might refer to a lot of activity which ends us back in the same place!!

To what extent is the Rudd government's education policy direction consistent with either or both of these definitions? To answer that question I referred to a

range of resources such as policy documents, Parliamentary debates, Ministerial media statements and official government reports and papers to identify the component parts of the education revolution. As I read these I disentangled the many disparate and numerous educational strategies and initiatives relating to school education, by organising them into five themes covering (1) **decision making processes**, (2) **aims and purposes**, (3) **funding**, (4) **curriculum**, and (5) **accountability**. My analysis will deal with each in turn.

(Note: Explain that given the Rudd government's interest in transparent accountability and in reporting on school performance, I thought it would be appropriate to issue a **report card** for each of these aspects. I will use the criteria set out in the national curriculum papers as the reference point for my grades).

Theme 1 of the 'Education Revolution': Processes of policy making

In Australia, school education is the constitutional responsibility of the States. Until the 1960s, the States maintained separate educational identities, confining their collaboration to visits by key bureaucrats designed to exchange information and ideas (Barcan, 1980). However, once the Commonwealth began funding school education (public and private) in 1963, the educational dynamic changed. This decision brought another player into the field, one with an interest in linking funding to collaborative national endeavour on projects that connected to the perceived national interest. From that time, the tension between the nation-building aspirations of the Commonwealth government on the one hand and the constitutional responsibility of the States for education, became a defining characteristic of Australian education (Piper, 1997).

For most of the period from 1968 to 2003 the Commonwealth tried to exert an indirect influence over education systems in the states and territories without

appearing to trespass upon the constitutional responsibilities of the States, first through the Australian Education Council (AEC) and then, from 1993, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, now MCEECDYA). During this period, collaboration between the states and the federal government moved along a continuum which ranged from indirect influence such as funding curriculum projects in (nationally) strategic curriculum areas, to more direct interventions through engineering agreement on national approaches, such as the failed attempt by Labor Education Minister John Dawkins in the late 1980s to introduce a single national curriculum. Along the way, an array of education bodies were established – and disestablished - at the national level. These included the Schools Commission in the 1970s, the Curriculum Development Centre in the 1980s, and the Curriculum Corporation in the 1990s. While these efforts legitimated the idea of national approaches to (school) education policy, the Federal Government could not impose its will and the States clung tightly to their constitutionally sanctioned autonomy (Piper, 1997).

By 2003, it was clear that the then Federal Liberal Minister of Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, was becoming impatient with having to win the support of the states and territories in order to implement his government's ideas. He made a vigorous call for national curriculum approaches (much as Dawkins had done 15 years earlier) but rather than seeking to achieve agreement through collaboration, the new tactic was to threaten to withhold funds from the States and Territories unless they agreed to implement certain curriculum changes, most of which were determined unilaterally by the national government. The States and Territories bowed to coercive federalism, and between 2003 and 2007 agreed to such disparate curriculum initiatives as benchmark testing for literacy and numeracy, a requirement for all schools to have a functioning flag pole and to hang a values poster in the school foyer, A-E reporting, performance

pay for teachers, compulsory Australian history in years 9 and 10, and so on. There was growing resentment of coercive federalism from the states and the education profession who were becoming tired of the tactic of denigration of schools and teachers by Federal Education Ministers that seemed to accompany each new initiative. But just as resentment began to turn to hostility, the Liberal/National Party government lost office in the November 2007 election.

The election of the Rudd Labor government has signalled the start of a new phase in national approaches to education policy. Within weeks of assuming office, the new Labor Education Minister Julia Gillard made it clear that the government wanted to foster cooperation with the States and Territories. This would be achieved through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) which has begun to set the broad parameters and the Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) which has an oversight of implementation (Note: shift). Coercive federalism has been replaced by cooperative federalism - Minister Gillard calls it 'ending the blame-game' (Gillard, 2008a) - without diluting a national approach.

This is not to say that everything is sweetness and light. Recently for example, the state ministers have complained that the use of COAG productivity working groups is bypassing state Ministers; that there is too short a notice of commonwealth proposals; and that some of the Minister's proposals look like the Howard agenda, with the same people advising her in the federal department. No doubt this is the usual argy-bargy of the political process. But the fact is that it is being pursued by the Federal government without accusing the states, teachers and schools of indolence, incompetence and low standards – as was the case with the coercive federalism model.

Of course, we are yet to see if the collaboration remains intact once the States and territories change their political complexions. One of the hidden issues is

the legitimacy of the architecture of the whole national curriculum edifice. For example, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) which is a Commonwealth statutory body, has recently been established by the Commonwealth Parliament with the support of the States to lead the development and implementation of the national curriculum and associated accountability processes. This bipartisan support does not alter the fact that constitutionally the power to decide on curriculum matters still resides with the states. The latest national curriculum is only possible now because the states – through COAG and MCEETYA - have agreed to collaborate. At any time, such as with the election of a number of Liberal state governments, that support could be withdrawn. ACARA would be neutered. Of course the Federal government could then resort to threatening the states by withholding money, but it would be difficult to do this in the face of blanket resistance and anyway, it would undermine the claim to ‘cooperative federalism’. What would happen to the education revolution if its ‘key driver’ (Gillard, 2008a) disintegrated?

Notwithstanding, to the extent that education has been placed at the centre of the national government’s policy agenda – the Rudd government has made it clear that the future of Australian society depends on the quality of its education system – and that national agreement about the directions of education policy has been achieved through collaboration rather than coercion, I believe it is fair to say that we are witnessing a revolution in the processes of decision-making in relation to school education at the national level. The question is whether, having made education a priority, the government is pursuing a policy agenda that will deliver a revolution that will reshape Australian education.

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Theme 2 of the ‘Education Revolution’: Stated purposes and aims

Schools have always served a number of important purposes. Following Labaree (2006), some of these are public in that they advance the interests of society as a whole, for example developing informed and active citizens; developing in young people the capabilities to respect and work with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds; and developing understanding and skills for environmental sustainability.

Some are private purposes, in that they advance the interests of individuals such as education being seen as a passport to future security, the ladder for social mobility, financial advancement, self-fulfilment and so on. And some serve both public and private purposes, such as developing human capital for the economy by developing the skills to participate productively in the economy

The balance of these purposes is crucial. There will always be a mix. At any point in time, education policy and practice will take a position somewhere along the continuum of purposes from public to private. In the 1970s for example, there was a strong emphasis on the democratic purposes of education, as education policy and practice, in response to the challenges of the massification of secondary education, focused on questions of equity, access, and participation, aiming to give all young people access to a broad and comprehensive curriculum as a preparation for productive participation in society. It was about the common good and therefore had a predominantly public purpose.

Under the Howard government, education policy shifted to the other end of the continuum, away from a strong emphasis on the public and democratic purposes of education towards a dominant emphasis on private purposes. This new educational discourse was produced through trends such as (a) the construction

of education as a commodity to be bought and sold in an education market where schools compete and are expected to win market share by appealing to and satisfying the needs and wants of individuals (parents and students) now described as ‘consumers’; (b) the design of curriculum for the purposes of sorting, ranking and selecting; and (c) the enablement of market choice by providing comparative information for consumers through such mechanisms as standardised testing (Cobbold, 2007).

Under the Rudd government, there has been another shift, this time towards a dominant economic purpose, with almost every major government document and statement emphasising the importance of education to the development of human capital (eg, ALP, 2007). Thus education is not a stand alone item in what is known as the COAG agenda. It is listed under the priority of productivity, as Minister Gillard pointed out when announcing the COAG agreement on education last year:

(Education) is a major plank of the historic COAG agreement reached in Adelaide yesterday, which outlines a productivity and participation agenda that spans early childhood to adulthood (Gillard, 2008b).

Even the new national curriculum is justified in terms of its contribution to building human capital. Thus, in a major statement in September last year, Minister Gillard claimed that the proposed national curriculum will be:

*...future-oriented and will equip our young people with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to compete internationally and thrive in the globalised **economies** of the future (Gillard, 2008a, my emphasis).*

Although the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) contains a far more expansive view of the

purposes of education, the public rhetoric of the Rudd government and many of its strategies, limit the vision of the educational revolution to seeing students as (potential) human capital to be enlisted in the cause of economic recovery and growth. Such a stance marginalises the cultural, social, political and relational aspects of education. It understands students as potential workers and consumers, rather than as local and global citizens. It is hardly revolutionary.

At the same time, the Rudd government is foregrounding equity as a major goal of its education revolution. It is taking seriously the fact that too many students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds have for too long been short-changed by the education system. Thus, the government has committed itself to such priorities as lifting retention rates to Year 12 or equivalent to 90% by 2020; sharply increasing rates of participation in higher education for students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds; and raising literacy and numeracy outcomes, especially for indigenous students where it has a target of halving the attainment gap in year 12 by 2020 (Gillard, 2008c).

In my view this shift to placing equity goals at the heart of education policy does constitute a revolution. The Howard government’s emphasis on individual choice and education markets was always going to advantage those who have the largest helpings of economic, social and cultural capital. If it is a fundamental principle of a democratic society that all young people have an equal entitlement to a quality education, it follows that the society must remove the barriers to successful participation in education. The Rudd government’s commitment to equity is a tangible expression of this principle. However, it is diluted by the dominant focus on the economic purposes of education and contradicted by some aspects of its agenda that are, as I will explain in a later section, counterproductive to this key aim.

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Theme 3 of the ‘Education Revolution’: Funding and resources

Commonwealth funding for schools is a complex area, but it is so central to claims about the education revolution that it is impossible to ignore. I will deal with it briefly by exploring four specific aspects.

Specific Purpose Payments – A National Education Agreement

The Rudd government has made some significant changes in relation to the federal financial structure. In particular it has worked through COAG to reduce the number of Specific Purpose Payments (SPPs) to the states and territories (from about 90 to 5); place a focus on outcomes and incentives; and introduce a simpler process for evaluation and reporting. One of these relates to schools and a National Education Agreement (NEA) has been struck comprising outcomes, performance benchmarks and a performance reporting framework (Gillard, 2008d). This approach has at least provided a sense of coherence and common purpose to SPPs, replacing the disparate and idiosyncratic ‘inputs’, such as requirements for functioning flagpoles and the hanging of posters in school foyers, that were imposed by the Howard government. It has also given the states and territories a degree of flexibility in determining strategies to achieve outcomes. Supporting this approach are programs called National Partnerships (NPs) which place emphasis on specific policy directions such as teacher quality (\$550 million); literacy and numeracy literacy (\$540 million); and low SES communities (\$1.1 billion).

The sums of money allocated to these programs are significant and once again they place a focus on equity, as well as supporting teachers. In this respect they constitute a fundamental shift in policy. However, while the detail of the programs will be worked out by the states and territories, some of the broad

parameters are cause for concern. For example, the teacher quality National Partnership proposes an accelerated 6 week teaching training program for ‘successful’ graduates from courses such as maths, science and law, followed by placement in the most disadvantaged schools. Since there is no direct correlation between the academic ability of an individual and their capacity to teach young people, such a program can only serve to deprofessionalise teaching by demeaning its knowledge base (eg., Laczko-Kerr, & Berliner, 2002). Indeed, the scheme has echoes of the 19th century model of pupil teachers. Similarly, the proposal for performance payments for teachers and the emphasis on standardised testing as the focus of accountability for NPs, hark back to another time and so hardly comprise an education revolution for the 21st century.

Digital education revolution

At the time of writing, the government is part way through rolling out a \$2.2 billion National Secondary School computer fund – the ‘digital education revolution’ (DER) - designed to provide all year 9 -12 secondary school students with access to a computer (Gillard, 2008e). Once again, the expenditure is welcome but the implementation has been fraught. There are a number of practical difficulties including an initial lack of provision for the associated infrastructure needed for such a large injection of new equipment into schools, not to mention ongoing costs. These are surmountable, but the provision of equipment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for quality teaching. The central issue is the need for professional development to accompany the DER. A computer on a desk does not transform teaching. Unless significant resources are provided to assist teachers to develop and share ways to engage students and deepen learning through the new technologies, a bank of new computers will become not much more than a fancy chalkboard.

Building the education revolution (BER)

A key part of the government's medium term response to the global financial crisis was to announce a stimulus to the building and construction industry through the provision of public funds for infrastructure projects. At the heart of this strategy is \$14.7 billion for schools. In particular, three major programs - dubbed by the government as Building the Education Revolution (BER) - have been announced (Gillard, 2008d). These include the:

- Primary schools for the 21st century BER program (\$12.4 billion), involving the upgrade of large scale infrastructure in all primary schools (libraries and multipurpose halls);
- Science and Language Centres for 21st century secondary schools BER program (\$1 billion), involving long term investment to build new science labs and language learning centres with a demonstrated capacity to complete construction by June 2010; and
- Renewing Australia's schools BER program (National School Pride) (\$1.3 billion), with every school to receive up to \$200,000 for maintenance and minor building works.

These programs are supplemented by expenditure in other areas such as \$2.5 billion for Trade Training Centres in every high school in Australia.

This level of funding is significant - but it needs to be since Australia lags behind other comparable countries in its average expenditure on capital improvements for schools. For example, Adam Rorris (2009) shows that taking into account all sources of income over the period 2002-2006, public schools in the UK and the US received the equivalent of nearly \$1000 extra per student to invest in capital improvements than did public schools in Australia. If public

schools were to receive the same as their UK and USA counterparts, they would have received \$10 billion extra funds over the same five year period.

The \$14.7 billion capital works program has reduced the investment gap between public and private schools in Australia, but not eradicated it. The estimated capital investment per private school student last year was \$1774, compared with capital investment of \$948 for each public school student – a difference of \$826. In 2008, with the money from the building program, each private school gets an estimated \$3020 compared with \$2470 – a difference of \$550 (Rorris, 2009).

In addition there are a number of conceptual and practical difficulties with the BER. Apart from the speed of the process allowing little time for parent and community involvement in planning, and apart from the sorts of anomalies identified by the Australian over recent months (eg funding schools that are closing or schools of one student) - the claim that simply spending money will result in an education revolution cannot be sustained. Buildings in schools need to be consistent with educational aims and the associated curriculum and pedagogy, and yet the announcements and media statements about the BER rarely refer to the curriculum. While some schools have connected buildings and curriculum, many have not had the time to do so, or have been forced to accept pre-formulated designs. Far from using the opportunity to rethink traditional school design in line with curriculum change, the government has reinforced the status quo. The BER is a strategy to address the global financial crisis – it is not an education strategy.

In summary, the additional expenditure provided in the DER and the BER is welcome after years of neglect in school education: indeed such expenditure must be maintained and extended. More than this however, bricks and mortar cannot alone constitute a revolution.

Commonwealth Recurrent Funding for Schools

While there has been an overall increase in commonwealth funding of schools under Rudd, there has been no change to the ways in which recurrent funding is calculated or distributed to the various education sectors. Essentially the government has maintained all of the anomalies and inequities in the current approach to recurrent funding, including the Howard initiated Socio-Economic Status (SES) measure and its associated guarantees that no 'private' school will be worse off under the system than it was before the introduction of the SES. As a result, the Rudd Labor government continues to adhere to recurrent funding approaches which ignore the level of resources enjoyed by many wealthy schools; and to fund even the lowest funded private schools at 13.7% of Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC), when the per capita grant for all government schools is 10% of AGSRC. As McMorrow (2009) observes, '*.. the current system is arbitrary, dysfunctional, irrational and partial*' (p. 9)

There is an urgent need for a national debate about these issues, particularly about funding purposes, priorities and levels in order to arrive at a comprehensive national approach to recurrent funding that acknowledges the principle of providing universal access to quality schooling for **all** students. Minister Gillard has foreshadowed that there will be a review in 2010 that will canvass these issues in order to construct an approach for the next triennium starting in 2012 (Doherty & Patty, 2008). In the meantime it must be said that maintaining an unjust and dysfunctional funding model hardly constitutes an education revolution.

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Theme 4 of the ‘Education Revolution’: The official curriculum

In January 2008, Minister Gillard announced the establishment of the National Curriculum Board (NCB) comprising representatives from all States and Territories and with the remit to develop K-12 courses in Mathematics, Science, History and English for implementation across the country in 2011 (Gillard, 2008f). After that, the NCB oversaw the writing and consultation processes for a number of framing papers which outline the principles and architecture of the national curriculum and give guidance to the writers of each learning area – until it morphed into the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) which is an independent statutory agency established by Commonwealth legislation to oversee the development and implementation of the national curriculum, as well as the public reporting of school data.

The materials that are in the public domain at the time of writing (see the ACARA website - <http://www.acara.edu.au/default.asp>) set out the broad principles of curriculum design that will inform the detailed development of each learning area. In this section I will describe the many concerns that I have about the direction that is being taken by the national curriculum, drawing mostly from the major framing document entitled *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (NCB, 2009a).

Now, I do this tentatively - having been involved in a number of large scale curriculum developments myself, I am aware of the political complexities and pit-falls of the task. I offer what follows in the spirit of constructive critique.

The limited rationale.

The design of any curriculum is always strongly influenced by its rationale. For this reason, the limited rationale offered by the government for a **national** curriculum is a major problem. There seems to be two official reasons given for

moving from state-based curricula to a national curriculum. The first uses the railway gauge argument - that Australia needs curriculum uniformity and consistency across its states and territories in order to assist the 80,000 children who change states and schools each year, and to prevent duplication of resources. The second relates to educational outcomes. In announcing the National Curriculum Board on 30 January 2008, Minister Gillard claimed that a national curriculum will provide a solution to the wild variations in retention rates and student achievement between the state jurisdictions (Gillard, 2008f).

Whilst these reasons are provided without denigrating teachers and schools, both are untested. Why should a national curriculum affect the retention rate, any more or less than a state or territory curriculum? More importantly, they do not provide an exciting and futuristic rationale for having a national curriculum in the 21st century, rather than a number of State and territory curricula. They fail to address the key question: What is it about Australia in a globalising world that makes a **national** curriculum so important? As Kerry Kennedy (2009) argues, curriculum debates are '*not merely academic – they are debates about a nation's soul. About its values. About its beliefs*' (p. 6). The rationale for a national curriculum should not be founded solely on technical reasons. It must be seen in a cultural framework: '*It is the nation's curriculum*' (Kennedy, 2009, p. 6).

The lack of connection between the stated goals of the curriculum and the curriculum itself.

The Shape of the Australian Curriculum starts by describing the significant changes that have taken place over the past twenty years - globalisation, technological change, environmental and economic pressures, the global flows of people and money and so on - all of which have implications for education. As the document asserts:

However dimly the demands of societies in the mid-2020s can now be seen, some serious attempt must be made to envisage those demands and to ensure they are taken into account in present-day curriculum developments (NCB, 2009a, p. 5).

It then moves to the goals of education, using the three MCEETYA Goals of schooling: successful learners, confident individuals and active and informed citizens. So far, so good. However, given that this is the first national curriculum, one expects that these sentiments will be followed with an argument about how the curriculum should be shaped to deliver these ends, canvassing such questions as: what kind of knowledge should be in it?, how important is it to move across traditional knowledge boundaries?, how and why should knowledge be organised? (eg., subjects or learning areas), what theories of learning will form the basis of the curriculum?, and so on. Instead, we are simply told that the curriculum will comprise Mathematics, Science, English and History. That's right: at the outset of the project, the national curriculum designed to address the identified challenges of the future, was to comprise four stand alone subjects, supplemented by what are called 'general capabilities'. There is a serious disconnect between the stated aims and goals of Australian Schooling (MCEETYA, 2008) and the curriculum itself.

Since the National Curriculum Board/ACARA has commenced its work, there have been announcements about learning areas that will be developed at a later stage. These seem to have been added as a result of the intense lobbying in which various subject associations have engaged. Thus it was announced in 2008 that Geography and Languages would be developed after 2011 (Gillard, 2008g); and the Arts was added in 2009 (Ferrari & Perkin, 2009). Next month ACARA is required to report to MCEETYA on the approach that will be taken

to Health and Physical Education, Design and Technology, Economics, Business and Civics and Citizenship, in the national curriculum.

There are two points to make here. First, even if these extra learning areas are added in, drip feeding subjects is no way to design a futures oriented national curriculum. It is a basic principle of curriculum development that it is important to understand the whole (and the connections within it) before focusing on the detail of the component parts. The development of four subjects, and the principles upon which they are based, will have occurred **before** any decisions are taken about the ‘approach’ to 10 other learning areas.

Second, it is hard to see how all the huge societal changes and challenges that are identified at the beginning of the document, will be met by a reprise of the curriculum of the past. In terms of the structure of knowledge organisation, there are the same four core learning areas (Mathematics, Science, English and History) as comprised the curriculum of most states in 1901; and in terms of the curriculum architecture described in some of the curriculum papers – scope, sequence, strands and outcomes (now called achievement standards) – there seems to be exactly the same structure as the Statement and Profiles of the early 1990s. There may be nothing wrong with that, but it behoves the developers to state why maintaining the status quo, or returning to the past, will address the challenges identified. After all, it is Minister Gillard who maintains:

when you think about how the world has changed in the past 150 years it's hard to imagine any way in which it hasn't changed. Kids today are immersed in all kinds of things that were unheard of 150 years ago, and yet if you look at schools today they are more similar than dissimilar (Gillard, 2008h).

In part, these problems stem from the absence of a definition of curriculum. Clearly what is being described is the official curriculum – a statement of intention about what is to be learned in Australian schools. Usually such texts spell out the whole of the intended curriculum – what is in it, what weighting is given to each section, what is core and elective – with the whole piece having an overall coherence or integrity. The national curriculum has none of this. Each part is treated as being separate from the other. The national curriculum seems to be simply a number of stand alone subjects. A hint of this can be found early on in *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* document which has the heading: *Developing the scope and content of **each** national curriculum* (NCB, 2009a, p. 4, my emphasis), in referring to each of the four learning areas: that is, we apparently have not one but a number of national curriculums.

The serious design issues

There are a number of serious deficiencies of design that must cruel the project. These include the following:

First, in a number of sections, the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* document refers to the need for the national curriculum to be combined with that of the states and territories. It asserts for example that:

Within its remit to develop curriculum for particular learning areas, the Board will work to ensure that its curriculum connects with curriculum developed by the states and territories (NCB, 2009a, p.8).

Unfortunately, nowhere does it hint how this might happen, nor does it address the huge issue of how curricula with different conceptual bases and architecture can coexist in this way. This problem is particularly acute at the senior secondary end where there is a huge variation in methods of assessment and reporting, compulsory subjects and so on (eg South Australia, Research project,

PLP). Unless this conceptual difficulty is addressed before writing starts it is inevitable that the lowest common denominator will be adopted.

Second, the document refers to a number of ‘general capabilities’ which are to be ‘*represented in each learning area in ways appropriate to that area*’ (NCB, 2009a, p. 12). The capabilities appear to be little more than an updated version of the key competencies (thinking skills, creativity, teamwork, self management, intercultural understandings, ethical and social competence, ICTs, literacy and numeracy). There is no indication about how this list was arrived at or why they are called capabilities. And the document sheds no light on what they are in curriculum terms. Given that the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* outlines the key elements of the national curriculum, it would be expected that the document would deal with such basic questions as: (a) what is the ‘content’ of each of these capabilities and how should it be sequenced across the various stages of schooling? Has this been described before the writers start their work. If so, what consultation was there about this; and if not how will they ensure consistency of interpretation across learning areas and/or avoid duplication; (b) will the capabilities be described separately in each learning area or absorbed into the content? If the latter, how will we know? (c) are the capabilities to be assessed separately and reported on? Will there be achievement standards for them? (d) How will the curriculum ensure that all are treated equally? Are they meant to be treated equally? (e) how will capabilities be integrated with the curriculum of each States and Territory, especially since a number of jurisdictions have their own versions of generic skills and understandings? Such questions need to be answered (or should have been answered) before the writing commences, otherwise capabilities will be ignored or treated superficially at best, as they have been in the Framing Papers for each Learning Area. For example, the History paper addresses the role of capabilities by

simply listing them again and then asserting that they should be represented appropriately in the history curriculum:

Skills and understandings related to numeracy, literacy and ICT need to be further developed and used in all learning areas, as do thinking skills and creativity. In addition, there are other general capabilities like self-management, teamwork, intercultural understandings, ethical awareness, and social competence which will be represented in each learning area in ways appropriate to that area (NCB, 2009b, p. 15).

Third, one of the features of the contemporary world is that the approach to issues, problems and challenges requires us to cross established disciplinary boundaries, not remain trapped within them. This should be a central feature of a contemporary curriculum. Unfortunately the document pays only lip service to the issue. It argues for a *'discipline-based curriculum (which) allows for cross-disciplinary learning that broadens and enriches each student's learning'* (NCB, 2009a, p. 11). Apart from not providing a rationale for the favoured approach being cross-disciplinary as opposed to integrated, the learning area framing papers adopt a particularly emaciated version of 'cross disciplinary learning', understanding it simply to be the appearance of aspects of one learning area inside another. For example, the History paper describes the Arts thus:

Historical understanding enhances student appreciation of the arts and, in turn, can be enhanced by drawing on a wide range of artistic forms and considering them in the historical context (NCB, 2009b, p. 14).

That is, far from organising the curriculum in ways that require students to explore problems and issues by using knowledge and skills **across** a range of

disciplines, cross-disciplinary work is simply a means to enhance the learning of students **within** a discipline. This is hardly the stuff of which curriculum revolutions are made!

The lack of understanding of equity issues and the curriculum.

The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* paper fails to come to grips with all that we have learned about equity and the curriculum over the past two decades. Despite claims that the new curriculum will take equity seriously, only one reference is made to it:

One important lesson learned from past efforts to overcome inequity is that an alternative curriculum for students who are regarded as disadvantaged does not treat them equitably. It is better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations (NCB, 2009a, p. 8).

Now apart from the fact that the idea of ‘alternative’ curricula as an equity measure for those ‘regarded as disadvantaged’ in the compulsory years of schooling was jettisoned in the early 1980s, this approach fails to take account of some of the fine work undertaken by Australian scholars such as Richard Teese (2000 & 2003) and Raewyn Connell (1997) over the past two decades into how the curriculum and associated curriculum structures work to advantage some groups over others. It assumes that knowledge is neutral and that concepts such as cultural and social capital don’t exist; and it fails to acknowledge the ways in which the very structures of the curriculum can discriminate against certain groups of students (see *Undemocratic Schooling*). Obviously equity relates to a whole range of factors, only one of which is the official curriculum. But to the extent that curriculum contributes to producing inequitable

educational outcomes, it is incumbent on ACARA to declare its stance on equity and the curriculum, taking account of recent research, by releasing a paper to guide the writers in the first instance and to inform ongoing discussion and debate in the profession. It must do more than produce the standard list of 'disadvantaged' or marginalised groups and urge that their perspectives are taken into account.

The timelines for consultation and implementation.

Given the range of unresolved issues such as those identified above, the rapidity as well as the limited extent of the consultation processes and implementation are worrying. Consultation for the framing papers produced small numbers of responses. For example, there were 82 written submissions to the History Framing Paper and only 220 survey responses (NCB, 2009c, p. 17). While a number of these responses were from Associations representing many teachers, this is still a very low response rate from the nation's 250,000 teachers and casts some doubt upon the level of engagement of the profession with the process.

The writing of the four learning area documents is taking place during the remainder of 2009, with consultation for the compulsory years occurring between January to April 2010 with publication in July 2010; and the senior years consultation occurring from March to June with publication in September 2010 (ACARA, 2009). These are restricted time frames for consultation with the profession and clearly do not allow for extensive trialling or debate.

More worrying still is the fact that, at most, teachers will be given 4 months to acquaint themselves with a brand new curriculum before implementing it at the beginning of the 2011 school year. This is contrary to everything that we know about sound professional development practices and educational change. It is

even more concerning given that the majority of teachers who will teach history in the primary years do not have a history major. As far as I know, there has been no systematic attempts to work with University Education Faculties to address the short term need for postgraduate programs in history and history teaching for current teachers; and the on going need to include a preparation for teaching history into undergraduate programs.

These are just a few of the issues and unanswered questions relating to the national curriculum. It seems that the national curriculum is being made up on the run with the Minister drip feeding subjects and teachers being largely excluded from the process. Far from being an education revolution, this curriculum, and the processes being used in its development, ignore what has been learned about past processes of curriculum development at the national level (Reid, 2005) and are repeating all the mistakes of the past. This is not an unimportant matter given the Minister's claim that the '*national curriculum will outline the curriculum entitlement for every young Australian*' (Gillard, 2008a); and it certainly casts doubt on assertions that it will be a '*world-class curriculum*' (Gillard, 2008f).

(Here present report card and allocate a 'D').

Theme 5 of the 'Education Revolution': Accountability

Accountability is a key component of the Rudd national agenda – or to put it more accurately, a particular version of accountability. Minister Gillard argues the need for 'transparent accountability', by which she means that each year ACARA will publish an online profile of the results of the national literacy and numeracy tests for each school, along with other information such as numbers of teachers and attendance and retention rates.

This information will enable parents and the general public to look at the performance of an individual school, compare the performance of schools in a defined local area, and compare the performance of ‘like’ schools across the country. It is the capacity to compare schools that lies at the heart of the current debates.

The Minister argues that such information should be available for two reasons. The first reason is to help schools and education systems identify where there are problems in order to address these to help lift performance. Where they fail to do so, the Commonwealth will expect education authorities to take serious action – such as replacing the school principal, replacing senior staff, reorganising the school or even merging it with other more effective schools. Associated incentives may include performance pay¹ (Ferrari, 2008)

Whilst the first reason may be an argument for common testing information being used to inform decision making – where the tests are diagnostic and resources are available to address the identified problems - it does not follow that the results should be publicly available for reasons of comparison. Nor does

¹ *The precise detail of the Gillard approach to accountability has yet to be worked out, but we can get some idea of what is envisaged by looking at the New York school system which has implemented a model extolled by Minister Gillard. This approach awards an A-E grade to schools on the basis of test results, data on such matters as attendance rates, parent questionnaires and student progress. On the basis of these annual reports, A and B schools are eligible for financial rewards; and D and F schools are required to put in place improvement measures designed to achieve set targets. The consequences of a lack of progress include a possible leadership change, restructuring or closure. Schools which receive three ‘C’s’ in a row are also treated as failing schools (Medina, 2008). The Chancellor of New York Schools, Joel Klein, is also considering awarding pay bonuses to teachers at schools with improved report cards. Similar schemes have been tried in the UK).*

it justify the use of punitive sanctions which have failed in a number of jurisdictions around the world, and for which there is no research evidence. Such approaches have tended to disrupt rather than enhance quality.

However, the second reason - to provide parents with information to enable them to choose between schools - does depend on making school results publicly available in a particular form and it is this that demands scrutiny. Minister Gillard rejects the idea of ‘simplistic’ league tables and argues instead that it should be possible to compare schools around the country that have similar characteristics, such as the socio-economic status of the communities they serve. That is, the Minister recognises the dangers of undifferentiated league tables, but believes that these can be averted by comparing ‘like’ schools.

Now, the Minister’s opposition to ‘simplistic’ league tables is based on sound evidence. When testing no longer has a diagnostic purpose but instead is used to rank schools, it becomes high stakes testing with some toxic results. There is much research evidence to show that high stakes testing and league tables have not worked elsewhere and are being questioned or abandoned in many countries.

South Australia’s former CEO of Education, Dr Ken Boston, recently used his experience in England to warn against adopting a high stakes testing approach. He argues that league tables have narrowed the curriculum as teachers are urged to teach for the test, damaging the breadth and quality of school education. American research has shown how high stakes testing with associated league tables has stigmatised whole schools – invariably those in the most disadvantaged communities; and caused schools to manipulate data and to hide problems as they fight to stay out of the bottom half of the table. All to tell us what we already know, at great expense.

So league tables have disastrous consequences. Does Minister Gillard's proposal to confine league tables to 'like' schools address these problems?

Even assuming that 'like' schools can be identified – and there are plenty of concerns about the technical difficulties of doing so - the argument does not stack up.

For a start, under the Gillard proposal, when parents compare schools in a local area, they will be able to compare all schools, not just 'like' schools. That is, there will be easily accessible local league tables. Surely if national league tables are bad policy, then so too are local league tables – perhaps even more so given that most parents will be choosing schools within their local area rather than elsewhere in the state or interstate.

The big problem however is that no matter how benign the intentions of the government, once test information is provided publicly it can be used by anyone to construct across the board league tables. The daily papers in Tasmania and Queensland did just that this year and the damage to some school communities in those states is still being counted.

In summary, Julia Gillard's proposal to side step the dangers of league tables by comparing 'like' schools will run into the very problems that she is seeking to avoid.

More broadly, the whole approach is consistent with the philosophy of organising education systems through markets in education. At the heart of this approach to accountability is competition – the belief that the best way to encourage quality is to get individuals and institutions to compete for custom, by providing 'consumers' with comparative information about schools. As Kevin Rudd told the national press club last year '... if some (parents) walk with their feet that's exactly what the system is designed to do ...'. (Rudd,

2008). This is at odds with the claim that the approach is designed to address disadvantage. Extending the education market and improving equity are incompatible policies. Education markets lead to greater segregation and exacerbate achievement gaps in schooling. They provide an illusory choice for many, and inevitably residualise public education by leaving public schools with the largest numbers of students in need of special attention, and thus to do the heavy lifting on behalf of all schools.

This is not an argument against accountability. It is an argument against forms of accountability that reduce quality and widen inequality. There are far better approaches available. These are based on a commitment to the professionalism of teachers, diagnostic testing, adequate resourcing, and the reporting of rich sets of data. In short we need an approach to accountability based on an understanding that education systems must engender cultures of genuine transparency rather than dissembling, collaboration rather than competition, openness and respect rather than fear and blame. These positive features are the characteristics of Finland's education system – and it is no coincidence that Finland regularly returns the best PISA results (OECD, 2007). ((For example, in 2006 Australian was ranked 7th in reading (UK 17th), 8th in science (UK 14th, US 29th) and 13th (UK 24th, US 25th) in mathematics (OECD, 2007).

The Rudd government's approach to accountability unpicks its determination to make equity and quality compatible. Copying methods which are being used in less successful education systems is hardly the stuff of 'revolutions'.

(Here present report card and allocate an 'E').

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to disentangle the public rhetoric about the 'education revolution' and to make an assessment about whether it comprises a

fundamental shift in education policy and practice in Australia. I have argued that it comprises at least five key aspects, all of which shape the curriculum:

1. *Processes of policy making for the education revolution* – where I felt that the approach to collaboration with the states and territories to achieve an agreed national direction for education was a breath of fresh air, whilst recognising the fragility of the structures upon which these agreements are based (a).
2. *Purposes and aims of the education revolution* – where I argued that the dominant focus on education as a tool for the economy was too narrow, but applauded the focus on a concern for equity (C+).
3. *Funding and resources for the education revolution* – where I welcomed the increase in expenditure on capital works, infrastructure and education programs; but raised concerns about the fact that the inequities of the current recurrent funding arrangements had not yet been addressed, and pointed to a some deficiencies in the strategies that accompany the funding regime (B-).
4. *An official national curriculum for the education revolution* – where I argued that developments so far had settled on a framework which is insufficiently theorised, contains a number of serious design faults, does not face up to the connection between equity and curriculum, and is too rushed (D).
5. *Accountability for the education revolution* – where I argued that the government has opted for an approach which is based on failed overseas models and will be counter productive to the aims of excellence and equity (E).

(Here present Summary report card and allocate an overall ‘C’).

In my view, the national education agenda is too disparate, with its component parts being disconnected or at least inconsistent, the one with the other.

However, there is much that is worthwhile about the agenda and it is not too late to build on what has been achieved by developing an overall narrative for the ‘revolution’ which draws on the best research evidence and practice, intimately involves the profession in its development and eschews outmoded strategies. A genuine education revolution will look to the future not the certainties of the past. I hope I have made a small contribution to that end – in the spirit of constructive critique and debate that was so loved by Garth Boomer.

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