

National Curriculum, History and SOSE: an Evidence-Based Perspective

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In contrast to the Howard government's approach to a national curriculum in history (impose a NSW model on the rest of Australia and ignore the abbreviated but useful 2007 national consultation process), the Rudd government has gone for a slowly-slowly, below-the-radar approach. In fact, so slowly-slowly and so below-the-radar has it been that some of us might be wondering what's going on. There have been some smoke signals though. In late June 2008, a National Curriculum Board forum in Melbourne was convened at the airport Hilton, attended by all the usual suspects (stakeholders). This is how things normally get done. Draw as many consultees as you can to the preliminaries, especially the principals' associations, make them feel involved and then narrow down the field as the government moves towards the sharp end of the policymaking process, while issuing press releases, newsletters, speaking at key functions and calling for submissions from the wider community. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Canberra will be busy setting up *in camera* meetings with officials from the states and territories, a narrower field of stakeholders and, almost certainly, Curriculum Corporation (the publishing agency jointly supported by state/territories and by Canberra). Then will come the subject panels and the detailed nutting out, the territorial arguments ('My pedagogy is more important than yours') and the compromises.

Mixing metaphors, let's move from the smoke signals to a close examination of the chicken entrails. The Melbourne forum was backgrounded by a 31 page NCB 'Curriculum Development' paper. Interestingly, Section 2 of the paper outlined the NCB's basic operating principles. First amongst these was the view that "National curriculum needs to provide students with an understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing"; this to be undertaken in the NCB's first core phase of operations. Geography and languages are to come in a second phase. Additionally, invitees were asked

to read the autumn 2007 paper *The Future of Schooling in Australia*. You may well remember it. Launched by former Victorian premier Steve Bracks, it laid down the state/territory markers prior to any Howard national curriculum moves – and it killed off integrated social studies, recommending instead a reversion to history and geography. This looks positive for history teachers in those states and territories that have followed the well-meaning (on paper and in intent) SOSE/HSIE frameworks but who have all too frequently suffered from system-wide impractical and improvised classroom practice that militates against the idealistic goals of the social education curriculum. Indeed, those states and territories that have been the most prominent advocates of secondary generic social education have suffered the sharpest relative decline in senior school humanities subjects while NSW, with its longstanding policy of standalone history/geography, has seen its history numbers maintained at healthy and dynamic levels. For example in one smaller jurisdiction, formerly and firmly dedicated to middle school SOSE, students taking all histories at Year 12 comprised 19% of the year group in 2002, falling to 16% of the year group in 2007. In another much larger state, the equivalent 2002 numbers are 12%, rising very slightly to 13% in 2007. *These proportionate figures are characteristic of all states/territories with a former SOSE background.* In NSW on the other hand, even allowing for the downs and ups of the Carr years, history has retained its identity in the secondary schools. In 2002, for example, 26% of Year 12 students took all histories and 31% of all Year 12s studied all histories in 2007. This represents not only a much stronger base but also a very healthy relative rise of 5% increase over a five year period. The conclusion? Where generic social education once dominated the middle school curriculum, history, the major humanities subject, has suffered horribly.

However, for frequently maligned social educators, the news does not look all bad. Integrated curriculum at primary level

looks safe, and rightly so. This means that HSIE-revisited may be the new look in NSW. More worryingly for history teachers, the NCB seems to be seriously interested in middle school curriculum models and this could well mean taking an integrated approach through into mid-secondary school. The middle school curriculum initiative, a laudable attempt to deal with student disaffection and low attainment in Years 7-10, is a part of a big political push in the various jurisdictions to upgrade student achievement. What concerns me here is that the clear advantages of following a careful and technically accomplished integrated curriculum in primary schools may be used to justify its adoption in Years 7-9 in secondary schools. The consequence could be a concomitant drive for history to be subsumed within social education 7-9 at least, and, if this is the case, we will have a huge problem when it comes to meeting the NCB's stated goal of providing 'students with an understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing', because, when it comes to historical knowledge and understanding, the arguments for a generic social education curriculum in the secondary school simply do not stand.

First, the proponents of secondary-level social education, sincere and dedicated educators as they may be, all too frequently rely for their arguments on supposition, assertion and repetition. By this I mean that they assume that social education at the classroom level is of universal benefit, they assert that only generic social education can provide modern, progressive understandings and they repeat the furphies that history is a narrow (facts about dead famous people), traditionalist (chalk and talk), 1950s stuck-in-the-mud discipline taught from a textbook. That's their stale and unsupported rhetorical position and it is one that is completely out of touch with modern practice when it comes to teaching history.

The second, and associated failing of the more zealous generic social education supporters is to do with research. There is no Australian or international research that shows a clear, system-wide benefit from teaching social education rather than history/geography at the secondary school level 7-10. Let's rewind that. No research. None. Zero. Zilch. Indeed, the empirical evidence that is available points entirely in the other direction. For example, the 1999-2000 National Inquiry into the Teaching and Learning of History, which included an unpublished national survey of 356 secondary humanities teachers, clearly showed that SOSE was generally disliked by humanities teachers partly because of

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its nebulous nature and partly because it was seen as an expedient (for school management), low-status 'sink' subject when it came to staffing and timetabling. To be fair, there are indeed some terrific social education teachers out there, and many wonderful social educators in faculties of education, but the facts on the ground are inescapable. *First, secondary generic social education may be easy to timetable but it is hard both to teach and to resource. Second, it has all too often been manipulated by school leadership teams who think history is low-level general knowledge about dead people. Finally, it is generally acknowledged to have been a curriculum failure.* Indeed the 2007 publication *The Future of Schooling in Australia* as much as admitted that. Furthermore, to nail the point to the door, there is no other OECD nation that has adopted a K-10 generic social education approach, not least flavour-of-the-year Finland.

At this point, let's go back to social education rhetoric and look at the question-begging assertion that only social education can provide the understanding required in today's harum-scarum world. We are told, for example, that social education *alone* may provide understandings of other people, nation states, national and supra-national organization and global issues. We are also told that, amongst other things, social education *alone* can provide critical, rational thinking, an understanding of human rights and an understanding of cultural differences. Hang on a minute! History teachers deal successfully with these topics and concepts all the time, as well as dealing with many other skills, perspectives and topics. When I read these kinds of statements about social education, I have to wonder where the authors have been for the past twenty years. Not only are they research-deficient when it comes to the effects of generic social education at the secondary school level, but they are clearly research-deficient when it comes to the teaching and learning of history. To help them improve their own understanding of what constitutes modern (not 1950s) history teaching, here is a primer on where we are up to now when it comes to the relationship between social education and history. What follows is what several of the major international education researchers say, based on 25 years of empirical investigation.

First, and probably most important of all, teachers' subject and curriculum knowledge are the two dominant factors in successful teaching of the subject, and we also know that the quality of classroom teaching is the single biggest factor in developing successful student understanding. The

implication is clear and unambiguous. *If we want our students to develop an authentic ‘understanding of the past’ as desired by the NCB and in a core national curriculum subject area, we need well-prepared and knowledgeable teachers of history and we need a disciplinary focus in the secondary school. What we do not need is the continuation of the 1980s-1990s curriculum tradition that secondary school history is handed the rough end of the timetable and is seen as a staffing filler.*

Second, unlike social education and the social sciences, history (a) is about difference and discontinuity, not about ‘sameness’ (ie presentism); (b) it is polythetic (multi-explanatory) and idiographic (concerned with individual events) – as opposed to social sciences which are generally nomothetic (aiming for a single, theorised and unified explanation) and (c) it is imaginative, reconstructive and even poetic. That being the case, in terms of a disciplinary formulation, history has much more in common with philosophy and with English than it does with such social sciences as psychology and sociology, although historians, being an eclectic bunch do use the social sciences (as well as economics, science and technology, anthropology and languages) to arrive at historical explanations. Bearing this in mind, contextual understanding of the world of the past needs very careful, skilled examination through ‘weaving’ together evidential resources – not just through making ill-informed and presentist assumptions about language, attitudes and actions in the past.

Third, *studies in depth* are essential for genuine historical understanding – as opposed to mere knowledge and the kind of superficial skimming that all too frequently occurs in social education classes that may be taught by, for example, non-historians parachuted in to the classroom clutching a SOSE textbook – and looking very puzzled. Furthermore, for students to gain authentic historical understanding, the subject needs to be taught as a form of knowledge, not plundered for ‘bits and pieces’ (again, as in generic social studies).

History is a complex discipline and even creating an historical narrative is a major cognitive achievement for students, requiring for example, an ability to deal with significance – imagine our puzzled non-historical teacher working that one out. And, as for significance, teachers need sensitively to engage students’ often diverging views

on historical significance by tackling interpretations which might be regarded as divisive.

Fourth, understanding the past is based on a ‘distrust in our capacity’ to know the past and historical understanding is better developed by skilfully questioning the texts – primary and secondary – and this is where teacher knowledge really kicks in. There are hidden gender issues here as well. When questioning the texts, history teachers will also have to deal with research showing that, in girls’ minds, women in history are blurry figures and, in boys’ minds they are invisible.

In summary, history is not regressive ‘narrow’ and ‘traditional’ general knowledge about corpses. It is a progressive, outward-looking, fascinating, open-ended field of study that, to be taught properly, needs its own identity at

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the classroom level as a complex, problem-solving activity. Indeed, Denis Shemilt established the complexity of secondary school history as long ago as 1980 when, in sampling control and experimental groups of 1000 secondary school students who

had, respectively been taught the more established syllabuses and the innovative Schools Council History Project (SCP) syllabus, 83% of the (non-SCP) control group thought that mathematics was harder than history – and 75% of the SCP experimental students had it entirely the other way around.

In conclusion, knowing all this, and realising the sway of political pragmatism together with the power of school-level expediency, my anxiety is that, despite the Rudd government’s best intentions, genuine school history could be given a back seat in a middle school framework, highlighted at the *stated* curriculum level (what is desired, on paper at least) but failing at the *enacted* curriculum level (what really happens in school – where, for example are they going to get all these new history teachers?) curriculum level. If that were to be the case, it would put an immediate end to the ambition that students develop a real ‘understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing’. Moreover, in NSW, it would almost certainly replicate the flight from Year 12 history so evident in the rest of the country. Let’s hope then, that we see a serious and evidence-based attempt at a core national history curriculum and not an evidence-free and resource-convenient framework that may well lead to the near extinction of humanities in the senior school.