



8 Galali Pl
Aranda
ACT 2614
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Professor Barry McGaw and the National Curriculum Board
PO Box 177,
Carlton South,
Victoria 3053.
Emailed to feedback@ncb.org.au 18th December 2008

Response from
Australasian Association for Progressive and Alternative Education (AAPAE)
to
SHAPE of the NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A Proposal for Discussion

The goals of the proposed National Curriculum, (Point 9) articulated as developing 'successful learners', 'confident individuals' and 'active informed citizens', preparing children for life in a complex ever changing world, provide a broad framework with which, on the surface, the members of AAPAE can concur. We ask the board to consider how could the place, design and process of curricula be different "if education is a lifelong process of drawing forth from within each person the full potential that lay within them, a lifelong process of self discovery" (Ackoff & Greenburg, 2008 Turning Learning Right Side Up) rather than a prescribed body of knowledge, skills and understanding that is to be poured into waiting empty vessels?

We welcome the recognition (Point 4) that curriculum is only one influence. This is an important point leaving space for the implications of the realisation that education is not limited to childhood and adolescence but is a process which nourishes each person through out their lives. This seems to be overturned by the immediate declaration of the need to set levels of expectations (Point 4) and the need for definition of WHAT young Australians SHOULD learn (Point 8), that the curriculum will be explicit about knowledge, understanding and skills, what has to be taught, what students should learn and achievement standards expected (Point 13). How is this sense of externally imposed requirements consistent with the declarations of the need that employers have for learners who are able to 'think flexibly, communicate well, work collaboratively with other think creatively, innovate, problem solve? How can learners experience and learn any of this if a standardised level of achievement, the 'same appropriately challenging expectations for all students" (Point 44/45) is demanded and valued above all else?

The suggestion that different curricula have been equated with or even caused lower expectations is of concern. (Point 11) How can the Board enable those involved in education at all levels to accept and value the challenges of difference and diversity? What difference would it make to the proposed national curriculum if they were seen as signs of strength?

The proposed curriculum recognises the real world of differences in learners and learning styles, interests and rates of development, yet suggests returning to a lock step year by year programme. (Point 15) The main justification for this is because teachers have to work with a

yearly group. What would be the result if the designers considered that more flexibility might encourage more creative groupings of learners and recognition of the value of intergenerational co-learning?

Though students have performed well on the PISA assessments they indicate that they do not like their learning (Point 30). This seems almost to be passed over as of little significance. AAPAE members find this goes to the heart of our disquiet about the compulsory nature and standardised expectations of the proposed National Curriculum. Dismissing this as the domain of teaching and not curricula both creates a divide between these closely interdependent realities and relieves the architects of curricula of the need to enable enjoyable, passionate, in depth learning. What might be the sense and level of confidence and enjoyment and satisfaction if the learning was genuinely self-initiated and negotiated in a context of caring relationship between co-learners within democratic rather than hierarchical structures?

The recognition of the need for scope for the professional judgment of teachers of what to cover, sequence, reflecting local and regional circumstance and their special knowledge and skills (Point 31) is very welcome and if given more genuine focus might drive the curriculum in exciting directions. We request the board also consider the value of recognising and including the students/learners as key players in this decision-making process, initiating and negotiating their learning and placing the quality of the relationship between teacher and learner or co-learners as central.

There appears to be another contradiction between the goals (Point 9) and the relegation of cultural sensitivity, respect, engaged citizenship, and commitment to sustainable patterns of living as perspectives rather than core competences. (Point 42). If these were more central how would the content of the national curriculum be focused on lifelong learning in the changed context of global life articulated earlier? (Point 1)

The plan to trial annotated students work samples as part of the assessment process is an interesting development and shows some valuing of the ongoing work of the learner (Point 47). In the context of requiring the same expectations and compulsory National Testing we request that the Board consider evidence that this ultimately drives the curriculum and teaching and could restrict the content and quality of the learning. National Curriculum, supported by a national testing program under the direction of a National Curriculum and Assessment Authority, have the potential to truncate learning opportunities for children. How would the board view the current developments in other countries such as the United Kingdom where there are serious concerns raised about the effects of national curriculum and national testing regimes?

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/primary-schools-report-calls-for-urgent-reforms-1057282.html>

What place is there for transparency and accountability processes which acknowledge individual difference and learning styles, collaboration and co-operation and reduces comparisons between students and schools, and learner initiated self- assessment, within the context of the relationship and negotiations between learner, parents and teachers?

The statement "programs developed within a particular educational philosophy that influences curriculum design could continue in the presence of national Curriculum... remain a matter for State and Territory authorities" (Point 55) seems to ensure diversity and flexibility for the

members of AAPAE and we welcome this. Is there any contradiction when the Federal Minister Julia Gillard has stated that the National Curriculum and national testing will be compulsory and requirements for ongoing funding?
(<http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/Gillard/Releases/2008CurriculumCorporationConference.htm>)

What is the evidence that it is essential for a National Curriculum to be compulsory rather than a guide in educational philosophy and practice? What other models and countries, such as Finland where the curriculum is not compulsory, are being considered?

Alternative, Progressive and Democratic Schools (www.aapae.edu.au) exist in Australia and around the world (www.educationrevolution.org) because parents and children seek, sometimes intuitively, a learning place which is participatory, caring and enabling of unique and diverse learners. Parents, children and teachers who value the development of the individual in caring, democratic learning environments, education which honours and enables their total wellbeing ask the board to consider the place and value of diverse ways of learning.

Thank you for considering this response.

Yours sincerely,

Cecelia Bradley

President, Australasian Association for Progressive and Alternative Education (AAPAE)

Contacts: Phone: 02 62513136,
Email: cecelia.b@bigpond.com

Website: www.aapae.edu.au