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NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A POLITICAL-EDUCATIONAL TANGLE

Marie Brennan

Victoria University

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ABSTRACT

Recent moves in Australia to institute national curriculum emanated from federal governments of different ostensible political persuasions in the period from 2003, building on developments that go back over 25 years. This paper traces continuities and new developments, meditating on two questions: whether the current moves are politically likely to move along federalism in Australian education and whether the current approach to national curriculum is educationally sound. The two questions are intimately related but treated separately – questions of politics and questions of education – yet are inextricably intertwined in the processes of authorising a national curriculum. While it is always difficult to strike a balance between ‘informed prescription’ and ‘informed professionalism’, as Schleicher has noted, the context of neoliberalist-infused governments at all levels in Australia make this a difficult time for investing in national curriculum. Lack of infrastructure to support teachers and schools, lack of necessary feedback loops into policy and development, and lack of appropriate evolving and specified relationships among levels of government may well undo all the important educational work on national curriculum, as has happened on several earlier national projects in the education sector. On the educational front, the overcrowding of specified content, its specification at age levels, the disjuncture between content, assessment, and pedagogies, the ad hoc political decision-making that keeps altering the framework, the lack of any educational rationale and the superficiality of consultation do not bode well for providing practicable and well-resourced support for teachers. However, given other national partnerships, and work on federalising many spheres including the two big spending areas still under states’ control – health and education – it may be that national curriculum is a project whose time has come. If so – and this is still not certain – it signals major shifts in the governance of curriculum and particularly has implications for the role of teachers in the core of their work.

KEYWORDS:

National curriculum; curriculum policy; federal state relationship; teacher role; politics of education; syllabuses

Correspondence: Marie.brennan@vu.edu.au

Prof Marie Brennan
School of Education, Footscray Park
Victoria University
PO Box 14428 MCMC
Melbourne, Vic 8001
AUSTRALIA

NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A POLITICAL-EDUCATIONAL TANGLE

The politics of national curriculum in a federated system

This is not a good time for a country to be entering into national curriculum. Not only is the global policy context inimical to the necessary debates about curriculum but the use of the already politicised field of education as a vehicle to reform Commonwealth-State relations in a federated system is likely to lose the substance of the issues in the glare of politics. Globalising economic processes have been accompanied by cultural, technological, media, people and other movements (e.g. Appadurai, 1990) such that most nation states are inextricably tied to developments and changes elsewhere, as can be seen in recent global economic 'crises'. This frames educational policy in particular ways, with government attention in Australia, as elsewhere, focussed on education sectors mainly for their contribution to national economic productivity, i.e. to human capital concerns (Rizvi & Lingard 2010). Governments in OECD countries undertake new kinds of steering through competitive league tables across and inside countries, a focus on measureable outcomes through high-stakes tests and formal accountability requirements via the application of standards. National curriculum, I suggest, is both a symptom of such governance developments and a means by which new forms of governance of the education can be put in place.

Curriculum policies are always contentious, as they should be: any new policy for the official curriculum represents a set of decisions and enshrines particular values and purposes. People with a stake in curriculum – teachers, parents, politicians, students, and school authorities – are likely to fall into different 'camps' on the decision. Some may feel marginalised or excluded by the decisions made, others may not care particularly, or may see the official curriculum as largely irrelevant to what occurs in classrooms, while still others may endorse the curriculum as a needed redirection of existing curriculum. The move in the past few years to establish a national curriculum in Australia is no exception to the expectation of contestation but that contestation has largely been muted by its move into the federal domain from its traditional 'home' in state education authorities, and by the lack of either public political debate or public expression of professional contributions. In this paper, I argue that the particular form of politicisation of national curriculum in the past decade has not served the schooling sector well, undermining the development of high quality curriculum, and making it hard for alternative contestation about curriculum to be heard.

This paper I present as a 'meditation' – a space of quiet consideration of issues that matter, but are still in formation. It is not possible to consider the development of the Australian Curriculum in hindsight, as most policy analysis would do, since the focus is still in process of development. Methodologically, my work is informed by critical policy analysis (Rizvi & Lingard 2010); this paper addresses questions raised by Ball's analytic framework for policy: attention to text, to context and to consequences (Ball, 1994). This study of national curriculum is focussed on elucidating the relationship of the production of emerging texts with the broader context through a recent historical lens. It then juxtaposes educational concerns with the political, particularly the problem of federalist government. In the next section, I provide a brief historical overview of national curriculum for the purpose of

understanding the present developments as connected into longer-standing historical developments before moving into a discussion of the significance of the current proposal in the context of different previous official approaches to curriculum design. Moving on from more educational concerns with curriculum, I then discuss the particular approach to federalism underpinning this model of national curriculum before concluding with a discussion of the continuing problem in educational and political terms of the governance of curriculum.

Background: national curriculum as a longstanding issue for politicians

The idea of developing a national approach to curriculum – or at least consistency across state jurisdictions – emerged first in the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC)sponsored document proposing a *Core Curriculum for Australian Schools: What it is and why we need one* (1980). This document was unclear on whether its focus was a ‘core’ or a total curriculum (Tripp & Watt, 1984) but it argued for the need for more of a future orientation in curriculum, rather than the prevalent discipline-based subjects, and a means for ensuring all students would share in common knowledge and culture. Foreshadowing later developments in nominating ‘key learning areas’ (KLAs), the discussion paper proposed nine areas of knowledge and experience:

1. Arts and crafts
2. Environmental studies
3. Mathematical skills and reasoning and their applications
4. Social, cultural and civic studies
5. Health education
6. Scientific and technological ways of knowing and their social applications
7. Communication
8. Moral reasoning and action, value and belief systems
9. Work, leisure and lifestyles.

While there was some Australian discussion on core curriculum, state authorities (except for NSW) did not take up the idea and the CDC was itself rolled into the Commonwealth Department of Education in 1981. However, perhaps its legacy can be seen in the agreement in 1986 by the Australian Education Council (AEC - the body of federal and state Ministers of the time) to map the curriculum across the states. With federal Minister John Dawkins in as federal Minister from 1987, the negotiations with states to rationalise curriculum development and move to greater consistency were given a strong rationale emphasising education’s contribution to economic productivity (see Lingard et al., 1995; Kennedy, 1989). The *Hobart Declaration* on ‘Common and Agreed Goals’ (1989) and the 1991 AEC agreement on eight learning areas for national collaborative curriculum development (English, science, mathematics, SOSE, LOTE, the arts, technology, health) signalled significant commitment to national developments. Each of the eight states and territories had one learning area to develop and share across the country and, while the agreement foundered in 1993 on ‘states’ rights’, all states and territories referred the total work back to their own authorities, and national statements were released in 1994 for all learning areas.

The Howard government (1996-2007) began taking an interest in curriculum matters quite early in its tenure, with the second Minister, Dr David Kemp (1997-2001), overseeing the development of history debates and a 'discovering democracy' kit. With Minister Nelson moving into that position in 2001, there was an acceleration both of 'discourses of derision' about teachers, schools and poor education quality (Ball, 1990) and a tendency to develop policy on the run, with a particular focus on tied funding as a means of ensuring state compliance with new policy directions. The 2004 bill that was to provide federal funding for schools from 2005 to 2008, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement through Choice and Opportunity) Bill significantly changed federal-state funding relations in education. Agreement included, among other matters, the requirements for states to commit, in exchange for funding, to Plain English Report Cards, a common starting age by 2012, national testing standards in key subject areas, public school performance information, more power to school principals, explicit teaching of Australian values in schools, requiring all schools to fly the Australian flag, and initiatives to attend to school bullying and abuse. Tying funding to the states to agreement on policy directions is not new. In the post-GST tax reorganisation era, however, it is particularly significant, with states more dependent on Commonwealth funding and several states experiencing long-term downturn of their economy. This has made dependence on Commonwealth funding even more important and Minister Nelson was able to use this dependence to gain compliance to his wide-ranging agenda.

When the Curriculum Corporation (a body established and owned by the state and federal Ministers of Education arising from their 1989 AEC meeting) conducted a mapping of curriculum across jurisdictions in 2003, it was able to report that structure, bands & organisation of most state documents related to national statements & profiles, as developed in the early 1990s, and, despite considerable variation in extent of content description, cross-curricular and essential organising principles, there was a common format in many learning areas and all authorities provided implementation support documents for programming and assessment (Curriculum Corporation 2003). Thus there has been a de-facto common or national curriculum for almost two decades, despite state-based authorities retaining control and some diversity of emphasis. In 2003, the Ministers through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed to develop 'statements of learning' for the English, Mathematics, Science and Civics and Citizenship learning areas, around essential knowledge, understanding, skills and capacities. These were subsequently published by the Curriculum Corporation.

What is obvious here is a longstanding interest from the AEC in 1986, continuing through the Dawkins and Beazley ministries of education, through to the Howard ministries, in gaining consistency in curriculum across the states, rationalising resources, and a focus on outcomes which could be measured. Yet 'national consistency' is not a national curriculum. While Commonwealth-level Minister Nelson first suggested he would move to national curriculum in a media event in 2003, and suggested an Australian Certificate of Education for year 12 in 2005 (see Reid 2005b), the whole group of ministers were at that stage still seeking a much narrower agenda: statements of learning in four core areas. It took a change of federal government in late 2007 to include national curriculum as part of its 'education revolution' and thus to move from debate into providing infrastructure. Early in 2008, the Rudd government

announced a National Curriculum Board (NCB) to advance the project. Between February and October 2008, the interim NCB sponsored a National Curriculum Development paper (June 2008), a proposal on the Shape of the National Curriculum (October 2008) and a major consultation and discussion phase. Between November and February (unfortunately across the end of the school year, the summer holidays and the beginning of the following academic year), consultation was held about the ‘shaping papers’ for each of four subject areas: English, Mathematics, Science and History. Only after this process was out for consultation did MCEETYA agree that national curriculum was on the agenda, and then in carefully constrained ways. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians included the following commitment:

State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments will work together with all school sectors to ensure world-class curriculum in Australia. Together the national curriculum and curriculum specified at the State, Territory and local levels will enable every student to develop:

A solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values on which further learning and adult life can be built. (MCEETYA 2008, 13, original emphasis).

Eight learning areas were specified, much the same as the early 1990s key learning areas, but a little more elaborated, along with environmental sustainability and Indigenous content to be integrated across the ‘discipline’ areas, and reference to ‘general capabilities’ for all students (14). Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, was subsequently added to the cross-disciplinary perspectives to be taken into account in the main subjects. The last column in Table 1 summarises the current state of decisions about the Australian (national) curriculum, as at the time of writing (May 2011).

Curriculum is now being developed incrementally, in phases, under the umbrella of a new body that replaced both the short-lived NCB and the 20-year-old Curriculum Corporation: the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)*, put in place in May 2009. It is unclear what different levels of governments ‘working together’ might mean, the balance between national, state and local levels, or the extent to which ‘all school sectors’ –state government authorities, Catholic and Independent schools – are to be included, although all are now represented on the ACARA board.

Why might a national curriculum be so popular among governments, both state and federal, of different political hues, for around 25 years now? The initial CDC document had three purposes underpinning its curriculum: (a) for further learning; (b) for personal development; and (c) for effective participation in society (including economic, political, group, family and interpersonal participation). Since then, however, there has been little educational rationale provided, with nods to the 3% (Reid 2005b) of children of defence force and others moving across state boundaries being the closest reason given on educational grounds. The National Curriculum Board in 2009, followed closely by the new ACARA Board, argued that, given the changed global context, Australia needed ‘to develop a world class curriculum for all young Australians’ (NCB 2009):

It involves national acceptance of responsibility for high-quality, high-equity education across the country. It offers the prospect of harnessing expertise and effort nationally in the pursuit of common national goals. (p. 2)

Such a statement, echoed by ACARA, suggests that Australia – at that time in the ‘top ten’ countries on a number of international testing measures – would be best served by a new kind of curriculum that addressed key issues of low equity and common goals. Implicitly, it suggests we do not currently have such common goals or high equity and high quality, despite the existence of national common goal documents and similarities across states. Harnessing effort, across the states and territories, is needed. This is a political rationale in a federal system where constitutionally education authority remains with the states, unless referred to the Commonwealth government.

The longstanding political moves to national consistency in curriculum, despite different alliances across states and between states and Commonwealth governments, were accomplished through agreement of the federal and state Ministers almost as a self-evident ‘good’. There is no public documentation of an argument about why a federated system should follow the path of a common national curriculum. No other federated system in the OECD has a national curriculum – yet these other federated systems, including Canada, the USA, the UK, Germany, Mexico and Switzerland, still manage to participate in cross-national arrangements, including international testing programs, without the presence of a national curriculum, which remains with the relevant jurisdictions (states, provinces, etc).

What kind of national curriculum?

It is thus worth asking whether the current proposed and as-yet partial curriculum has the potential to be a ‘world class curriculum’ as promised. What kind of curriculum is being constructed? My first answer is that the Australian Curriculum is not curriculum at all. Rather, it is a syllabus document, specifying content and sequence of content by year level of schooling. Curriculum, on the other hand, is a much wider enterprise, around which definitions can be hotly debated and around which the decision-making locus can vary considerably, as I will discuss below.

[Table 1 to be inserted in this section]

Table 1 summarises the main approaches to the official curriculum in past 30 or 40 years in Australia. The first column, similar to the current Australian Curriculum approach in the final column, focuses on subjects, supported usually by official syllabus material. The syllabus approach has formed the main ‘grammar’ of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994), used as the basis for timetabling, faculty organisation and teacher specialisation in secondary schools, not to mention teacher education qualifications. State systems have varied in the extent of their prescriptions around subjects. The school-based curriculum movements, particularly strong in South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT in the 1970s and 1980s, saw significant discretion at the school and individual teacher level, although subjects tended to prevail as the form of curriculum design. At the other extreme, at different times, states have prescribed strongly, not only the content but perhaps even the assessment items to be used.

A key problem for curriculum design based on subjects is how to add new kinds of knowledge or additional expectations to the curriculum. Pressures on the official curriculum have thus resulted in multiple additional 'subjects' added to curriculum: ICTs, sex education, drug education, driver education, life skills, work education, transition education have, at various times, competed for subject space on the timetable. However, except for a brief period in the early 2000s in Queensland, where Productive Pedagogies and Rich Tasks were taken seriously (Hayes et al. 2006), no State system in the last 25 years has really taken up curriculum design not based on content.

The introduction of Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in both the CDC Core Curriculum (nine areas) and the AEC (1991) authorised approach combined something of two approaches: subjects such as English and Mathematics with integrated approaches such as Technology or Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). In some jurisdictions, or even at school level, the integrated KLAs reverted back to what were seen as their constituent parts, or 'disciplines' (see Dong in Luke et al., 2008); SOSE might be history and geography, or legal studies and politics in senior years,. Learning areas such as SOSE and Design and Technology especially, supported by emerging professional associations, took up the challenge of integration and pushed the boundaries of subject organisation as the basis for school organisation and curriculum work. The Mayer Committee's approach (Mayer, 1992) to providing seven generic employment-related competencies emerged at much the same time as States were developing their KLA-related materials, and they added an emphasis on generic skills and capacity to 'learn how to learn,' as underscored in the movement to Lifelong Learning supported through UNESCO (Delors, 1994). In effect, state school teachers have had to backward-map their planning and student assessment onto content, key competencies, national statements and profiles and, more recently, essential learnings.

The design principles underpinning essential learnings and integrated curriculum could potentially take on the problem of overcrowded curriculum. This would mean regular updating of content and resources, suited to the local level, but with clear and articulate principles as the basis for proposals and justification. Integrated approaches to curriculum and the generic competencies or skills all de-emphasise content in curriculum design. This shift was taken further in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the movements in most States to give more prominence to 'Essential Learnings' or 'New Basics' (see Education Queensland, n.d.) as organising principles for selection of knowledge. Such shifts took seriously the challenge for teachers in needing a tool to select knowledge domains with students, principles that paid attention to change, the emphasis on 'knowledge' in the economic restructuring, the growth in interdisciplinary projects and research, and the need for students to be able to contribute both to the generation of new knowledge and to building judgement about what 'good' knowledge might look like. These design debates have been important also as they necessarily recognise the importance of teachers' judgement in making connections between local cultural and global circulating knowledges, with their students also playing a role in curriculum co-production.

The new National Curriculum has ignored such debates, and the changing place of knowledge in the roles of teachers and students in a context that has massively restructured compared to when subject divisions might represent the most important knowledge able to be re-contextualised into schooling.

What we have, as noted in the final column of Table 1, is a plan for thirteen subjects, over three phases, with general capabilities and cross-curriculum perspectives added in. Indeed, the first four subjects had to be retro-fitted for the new additions decided from the MCEEDYA meeting of December 2009.

Will there be a fourth phase with more new subjects? What has happened to Studies of Society and Environment, that helpfully elastic integrated learning area which could address many curriculum additions, in the overcrowded curriculum? This is incremental aggregation design at its worst. Like the States before it, ACARA's version of curriculum has avoided making key decisions or principles around knowledge selection, assessment, and remains silent on pedagogy. As pointed out by the Australian Curriculum Coalition, there are already 'inconsistencies of approach and terminology across subjects; content descriptions vary widely between descriptions of knowledge and descriptions of what students should do' (ACC 2010, p.4). In addition, the subject design approach fails to recognise differences between early years, primary and secondary schooling, omits middle years developments, the existence of P-12 or area schools, multi-age classrooms, or settings which are largely Indigenous. Subject segregation works against integration which is the basis for many curriculum approaches in primary and middle years. As a syllabus, it apparently eschews pedagogical directives, while assuming that content will be taught in particular sequences at particular year levels, already altering the pedagogical order in a wide range of schools and settings. After four subjects, the curriculum is already overly full: what will it be like after 13? And this is only the Foundation (F) year to year 10 curriculum. The plans for a unitary senior secondary curriculum, one may hope, need so much debate that perhaps this may be shelved, given the stakes and poor performance to date.

The report card on national curriculum?

Reid set out six criteria for an Australian national curriculum to avoid problems of previous efforts and deliver on quality:

A national approach to curriculum should be based on and consistent with:

- *a clearly articulated rationale, purposes and philosophical reference points*
- *a theorized and articulated view of curriculum*
- *a strong research and conceptual base*
- *a process that engages the professional community in the conceptual phases*
- *a process that seeks to build a constituency of support*
- *a recognition of the political realities produced by the Australian Federal system*

(Reid, 2005a, pp.6-7).

It ought to be recognised that there is considerable curriculum expertise in the various state instrumentalities, even if it has not been present in the past quarter century in federal agencies. It is clear that little of this expertise was used to inform most of the deliberations and decisions of Ministers and the

timeline for development has meant little capacity could be freed up at the state level among people already engaged in full-time jobs, in a devolved environment. Nor has the expertise of teachers been given opportunity for sharing across the country.

1. Clearly articulated rationale, purposes and philosophical reference points

Reid argues strongly for the need for well articulated rationale, perhaps an over-estimation of political processes but one which ought to have been undertaken by the National Curriculum Board (2008-2009) and, since May 2009, by ACARA. The rationales provided only really touch on the aforementioned problem of students, particularly defence force children, who transit across state lines. Even if not clearly articulated, there are implied reasons, apparent through statements released after meetings (<http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/meetings,11402.html>) and social and educational need have taken a back seat to efficiency and economic interest, first apparent in Minister Dawkins' statement "Strengthening Australia's Schools" (Dawkins, 1988). These economic concerns have, in practice, tended to override other purposes for education such as building social cohesion, citizenship and creativity, although such terms appear regularly in three sets of national goals for schooling in 1989, 1999 and 2008. Equity is perhaps the most surprising absence, given its importance in rationales for Commonwealth interventions in education in previous decades (see Collins, 1994; Marsh, 1994; Piper, 1997, Brennan & Reid 2009). While the goals are established for schooling, how these are to be translated into curriculum – or even syllabus – terms is not at all clear. The Australian Curriculum Coalition argues that the 'drafts viewed to date do not represent a world-class, 21ST century curriculum' especially in relation to the goals of the Melbourne declaration 'that young people should become successful, creative, innovative and resourceful learners ...' (ACC 2010, p.4). If the existing goals do not provide adequate reference points for syllabus/content choices, the underlying rationale and purposes need to be more clearly articulated.

2. A theorized and articulated view of curriculum

The Australian Curriculum does not have a published view of curriculum. Nor, given its mixed ancestry and organisational sponsorship is it likely to. For some, curriculum is a process (e.g. Stenhouse, 1975), for others, such as Bruner (1960), it is an organisation of key or 'big ideas' into a spiral, while, for still others, curriculum is lived, praxis, enacted by students and teachers. For some curriculum will be the result of political discussion, representing key decisions about what counts in terms of valued knowledge, enshrining particular values and accompanied by appropriate ideas for monitoring and assessment. For others, including many in OECD countries, curriculum occurs at the school level, perhaps with support from state-provided resources or textbooks, perhaps organised through particular assessment tasks or examinations beyond the school level.

Lawrence Stenhouse, one of the great English-speaking curriculum thinkers in the 20th century, suggested that an official curriculum should give teachers the basis for planning the course, guidelines for researching it in action, and allow a clear justification open to scrutiny. He offered the following:

A. In planning:

1. *Principles for the selection of content - what is to be learned and taught*
2. *Principles for the development of a teaching strategy - how it is to be learned and taught.*
3. *Principles for the making of decisions about sequence.*
4. *Principles on which to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and differentiate the general principles 1, 2 and 3 above, to meet individual cases.*

B. In empirical study:

1. *Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of students.*
2. *Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of teachers.*
3. *Guidance as to the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in varying school contexts, pupil contexts, environments and peer-group situations.*
4. *Information about the variability of effects in differing contexts and on different pupils and an understanding of the causes of the variation.*

C. In relation to justification:

A formulation of the intention or aim of the curriculum which is accessible to critical scrutiny.

(Stenhouse, 1975, p. 5).

ACARA might perhaps be able to use this as a framework for retrospectively developing a view of curriculum which could communicate both to the broader community and to teachers who need to be able to plan, research and justify their work in such terms.

3. A strong research and conceptual base

The research and conceptual base for the curriculum work could perhaps best be seen by implication in the Shaping Paper for each of the four subjects produced in the first phase. However, the further development of each subject – design by committee – has watered down the research and conceptual basis from its not-very-explicit focus in these papers, such that they most resemble the existing curriculum content, and are not underpinned by a view of the three ‘message systems’ : knowledge, pedagogy and assessment and their necessary interconnections (Bernstein, 1971). The Australian Curriculum Coalition – representing a range of principal, teacher union and professional associations from both state and non-state schooling groups – has noted the

need for a stronger rationale and curriculum theory, including the ‘need for an overarching framework for the curriculum to provide clarity about the conceptual model underpinning it; a stronger definition of curriculum ... to bring together content coverage, general capabilities and cross-curriculum dimensions; [specifying] how the different curriculum areas are related and the basis for their separation; and the lack of a theory of learning” (ACC 2010, p.4) . Without a robust conceptual base, teachers will not be able to make proposals that are coherent and allow a rich curriculum across subjects to be enacted with and for each student.

4. A process that engages the professional community in the conceptual phases

Since there were no conceptual phases, the professional community has not been brought into these debates. This missed opportunity is a serious one, since it has created the typical managerial separation of design and development from enactment. Unless teachers’ own knowledge is engaged and updated, anything new is most likely to be assimilated back into existing ways of operating. As the Australian Curriculum Coalition (2010) noted in their letter to the Ministers in October 2010, teachers need to develop ownership of the curriculum ‘if it is to be meaningful and effective’ (p3). Teachers are central to curriculum design work; they cannot be mere implementers of a syllabus.

5. A process that seeks to build a constituency of support

The social contract between the citizenry and governments helps to shape the expectations of what purposes schools might be expected to perform, and the key role of curriculum in meeting those expectations. The consultation processes associated with the national curriculum have been extremely rushed, largely online and the outcomes and submissions have not been made public by ACARA since it took over from the NCB’s short tenure. NCB was able to report, albeit minimally, on the range of submissions, their origins in terms of stakeholder, the content and what had been done to take into account the feedback received. ACARA does not make such summaries. Indeed, writers of the Shape Papers and committee members are required to sign confidentiality agreements that significantly limit their participation in public or professional debates, in what ought to be matters of public interest. Thus those stakeholders with most interest have not participated in debates; rather than building a constituency of support, submissions are privatised and managed.

6. A recognition of the political realities produced by the Australian Federal system

While there has been remarkable consistency in the efforts of Ministers over the past quarter of a century to gain a level of curriculum consistency, the achievements have not been so remarkable. State systems continue to organise curriculum frameworks, assessment systems and relevant curriculum authorities. The 1993 reversion to states’ rights, in the previous major effort to attain a national curriculum, stays in the memory of many currently working on the current proposal, and certainly among school teachers and professional associations. The existence of ACARA is no guarantee that national

curriculum will continue as an educational or political project. After all, previous bodies such as the Curriculum Corporation, the Australian Teaching Council, the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership, Teaching Australia, the National Curriculum Board, and, to go further back, the Schools Commission and the Curriculum Development Centre have all fallen by the wayside. Unless there is significant infrastructure built in to build links across sectors, across levels of government and, most importantly, among teachers and between teachers and policy bodies, national curriculum is likely not to work. 'One dollar companies', such as NCB or ACARA owned by Education Ministers, do not provide the appropriate policy forum, the resourcing required, the research capacity, the corporate memory, the professional knowledge and networks or interactional infrastructure needed to make national curriculum a reality.

This conclusion raises the political problem of federalism, to which I now turn. Reid's first five criteria for a successful national curriculum venture could be said to be educational in nature, although the processes of gaining stakeholder and professional support also require political will. However, educational strategies are required as both the means and the end of achieving a national curriculum. At this stage of development, considering both context and texts, none of Reid's criteria have been met. It may well be the final criterion that is important in the continuation of the national curriculum as a political project, irrespective of its educational merits.

Curriculum as a federalising vehicle: A longstanding political problem

Each colony that agreed to federate in 1901 already had its own public education system, public service infrastructure, and agreed syllabus, usually with a system of inspectors to ensure standards of performance of teachers and their students. The States and Territories each have considerable investment in steering their own education authorities and agencies, even if funding agreements with the Commonwealth government may specify particular projects and outcomes, or accountability regimes. Unlike the Commonwealth government, they employ teachers, run schools, organise capital works, establish agencies such as Boards of Studies, senior curriculum certificates. Such infrastructure has been built over time, in a range of domains including health, welfare, such that *states' rights* has been a key focus for any public policy initiative, even the formation of the federation itself.

The forms of government associated with the federal system have continued to evolve, responding to both internal and perceived external pressures. Scholars and politicians at both State and Commonwealth levels of government agree that there is a continued need for attention to how to make federalism work. Withers and Twomey (2007) in a discussion paper for the *Council for the Australian Federation* note a number of the benefits of a federated system over a unitary one, and provide six "C"s to summarise those benefits: 1) a Check on power, 2) Choice and diversity, 3) Customisation of policies, 4) Competition, 5) Creativity and 6) Cooperation. Further, they note that, even in economic terms, federated systems tend to do better than unitary national systems. From state perspectives, these are good arguments in favour of current arrangements.

State-level education systems have demonstrated many of the benefits of federalism, particularly through allowing diversity and innovation. The innovations that have emerged can have international significance – Queensland’s Productive Pedagogies and Rich Tasks, or its approach to statewide moderation of senior schooling rather than examinations are one set of examples. Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and the ACT all led the way in supporting school-based curriculum development in the 1970s and 1980s. NSW has had a strong central infrastructure for curriculum, except for a brief unsuccessful flirtation with regional services, and has a well documented set of resources for teachers to support their curriculum, along with excellent professional networks around senior school certificate areas of the curriculum. WA, Queensland, NSW and the Northern Territory have all produced many innovative approaches to attracting and retaining teachers, and providing professional development across their vast regional, rural and remote settings. It is clear that where one authority develops good practice, others are likely to borrow it. However, State-level infrastructure has been systematically wound back, commencing in the 1980s with policies of downsizing central services in favour of regional and devolved school responsibility. As I have noted elsewhere (Brennan, 2009), hundreds of central office positions were removed, especially in curriculum and professional development areas from 1989-1992 alone in most States. It might be that the growing interest by State politicians from the mid 1980s on in national mapping of curriculum and rationalising curriculum resources emerges from an awareness of the systematic reduction of such resources in their own States at the same time.

Yet, where federal cooperation across jurisdictions might help address longstanding problems, State-Commonwealth negotiations have not been so productive. Issues such as Indigenous education, the relationship between state and independent (but partially publicly-funded) school systems and the relationship between poverty and lack of achievement in schooling are all such longstanding issues that need federal and state governments working together. Jack Keating (2009) has also nominated several problems that need far more concerted efforts across levels of government, particularly the very centralised governance of state school systems, the politicisation of the separation of government and non-government school funding, weak and uneven investment in early childhood education, low completion rates of year 12 in some schools and locations, the growth of a highly marketised culture associated with patterns of success rates in and between school systems, and the problem of concentration of educational need in state-school systems in particular areas. Keating’s proposals for a national reform agenda included structural initiatives – national goals, national curriculum, a common regulatory framework, reform of funding arrangements and a national quality agency. Although I appreciate his careful analysis of issues, his proposals take on a particular form of ‘corporate federalism’ which fits well with the ‘audit society’ (Power, 1997) and its emphasis on standardisation, regulation and accountability. While he has taken up the seeming intractable problem of the need for cooperative, I would argue his suggested future directions are not the best direction for new federalist initiatives, as they are likely to undermine teacher professionalism and judgement, while empowering a narrow focus on accountability as a key role for government.

There have been various analyses of changes in emphasis in federalism in the Australian field of education, including ‘corporate federalism’ (Lingard et al., 1995), and more recent public and media discussions about coercive and cooperative federalism. The current federal government, under Prime Ministers

Rudd and now Gillard, seems determined to work through direct negotiations with the States, in a wide-ranging set of efforts to address key problems through national partnerships. Hospital funding, accreditation of health professionals, and Indigenous policy, for example, have had attention, so there is a growing 'federal governmentalisation' of public perception that this is the appropriate way to deal with key social and economic matters. That Australia avoided a recession in the 2007-8 global financial crisis seemed to underscore the importance of a federal governmental response, even if particular elements (such as slow progress in achieving completed housing in the Northern Territory, poor supervision of quality in roof insulation or poor completion rates of school buildings associated with investment in job creation to avoid recession) have been badly received by the citizenry. The Commonwealth government does, however, hold more of the purse strings and thus there are significant incentives for States to come to the negotiating table.

The new national partnerships in education, part of the overall Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform agenda, seem to offer more specific directions for the reform of federalism in education, as in other sectors. This form of cooperative endeavour, however, has certain drawbacks. Connected strongly to the reform of financial arrangements, and carefully negotiated to provide accountability data based on performance data, what is occurring is the development of a contract mentality (<http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/index.cfm>). Relationships between layers of government are established on the basis of formal contractual relationships which, as Yeatman (1996) pointed out some years ago, replaces the allocation of public values with legal contracts. This plays out further down the line of 'cascading contracts' (1996, p.285), altering the relationship and purposes of interaction from the conduct of education to the 'delivery' of compliance with contracts. As Ball has noted, contracts 'bring about a reshaping of the culture and structures of governance (both institutional and national) and of service relationships and of the commitments of public service workers' (2010, p.135). The model of 'contractual federalism' developing through the national partnerships still needs time to work through. National partnerships have encouraged contracts organised around achievements and audits. This is particularly worrying when applied to the domain of curriculum. Grumet and Yates argue (2011, p. 239) that:

Achievement and audit focus on emptied out measures of what curriculum does....this obsession with achievement and its politics and semiotics distracts communities from attention to school experiences of youth, and diminishes public education's contribution to a student's capacity to develop a full and productive life, participating the culture and development of his or her community. The audit culture simultaneously turns away yet strongly influences the task that is a distinctive function of curriculum: the deliberate shaping towards personhood of young people.

They go on to suggest that curriculum 'fixes' temporarily the world in flux, by deciding what is important to know and do for themselves and their cohort, their society. A number of countries in their struggles over curriculum, they suggest, fall between competing demands that 'thwart each other or mute one in order to address another' (p.240). If curriculum is, as they argue, 'an important conduit of national and global imaginaries' (p.244), how does the Australian curriculum set us up in relation to the rest of the world? What possibilities does it conjure for young people living in Australia? The Melbourne

Declaration has something of a 'go' at 'fixing' the world in flux but, as noted above, has not been translated into the details of the syllabus which largely focussed on content coverage at the expense of higher order learning activities.

If the efforts to develop and authorise a national curriculum in a federal system are to materialise, then there needs to be appropriate attention to questions of the kinds of infrastructure needed for all schools to make it work. This will need significant time and willingness on the part of all players, and the rush to get this curriculum to implementation stage has certainly not provided that kind of time. Currently state systems have significant hidden costs in providing infrastructure for senior certificates, curriculum materials and policies, advisors, professional development for teachers, support for professional associations, registration of teachers, among many other domains of curriculum support available to all schools, whether 'in' the state system or not. ACARA, while including all sectors on the Board, cannot provide access to the networks of teachers and materials that underpin successful state infrastructure. ACARA's web-based materials may, in time, provide good resources but they currently do not match the range of schools, settings and lived curriculum options that already exist. Specification of roles and tasks across levels of government will be needed and debated more publicly than has occurred to date in federal approaches are to be more than aggregated state efforts. Currently States are supposed to be making links with their existing curriculum so that implementation can be 'rolled out', as if on a delivery-line. Most states are not even ready with professional development for teachers, even though this is a specified devolution of tasks.

How does national curriculum address the differences between Indigenous education provision and those of the selective high schools in Sydney? Or resource a small multi-age rural primary school as compared to an elite metropolitan school? Negotiation across levels of government around such questions would need a different kind of attention to questions of infrastructure that might, as Keating suggests, occur around particular problem-area initiatives – middle years engagement, senior years pathways, and early childhood provision. Already the early years endeavours in national partnerships are offering a promising direction for such cooperation. Sad to say, national curriculum is not.

National curriculum is being introduced into a context in which the federal government is already active in ways which significantly undermine its espoused interest in national curriculum. NAPLAN testing has provided a streamlined focus on a *defacto* national curriculum, particularly in those schools where 'under benchmark' performance is significant. This *defacto* national curriculum, spurred into high stakes, USA style testing (Hursh, 2008) by publication of results on the Commonwealth government's *MySchool* Website, means that in many schools, particularly those in poor, rural or Indigenous settings, the curriculum is abandoned in favour of improving test scores, especially for students who might be brought 'up to standard'. As many have begun to document (e.g. Cobbald 2010), the effect on state systems where underperformance has concentrated, has been to move them into crisis management with short-term score improvement as the measure of success. The coercive federalism surrounding the introduction of *MySchool* website, and its publication of student data, along with financial assets and assessments of socio-economic background, has already garnered opposition from states and territories, despite the National Partnership work, and has now brought the non-state school systems into more explicit opposition.

If ACARA's *MySchool*, assessment and reporting functions are joined up with its national curriculum functions, and the dots are linked into an overall approach, then it may well be that Independent and Catholic schools could decide to opt out entirely, leaving national curriculum as a residual option for Government schools, or for those states with weakest curriculum infrastructure and most in need of money. As yet there has been no funding to the states specifically for national curriculum but this might need to change to gain a 'national' approach.

National curriculum: a problem of educational governance

As I noted at the start of this paper, this is not a good time for a federated country to undertake national curriculum planning. Educational issues have not been treated with appropriate rigour, so that the substance of curriculum design has not materialised. Unfortunately, the version of curriculum which most easily fits with a regulatory, accountability-driven, measurement-focussed testing policy regime is a return to the Tylerian (Tyler, 1949) model of objectives-based curriculum design. This linear and pre-determined characterisation of curriculum does not take into account the need for a futures-orientation, nor provide space for appropriate negotiation of knowledge among teachers and students in an information-rich and changing world. Nor does it allow for an appropriate role for teacher judgement, for student, parent and community input, or for identification of other emergent issues. There is no point in gaining good partnerships among State and Commonwealth governments if the substance of the joint work is incapable of delivering the goods – those 'goals' around which so much depends. If the focus of government is on controlling risk, and steering an expensive sector tightly, then the Tylerian model which currently underpins both national curriculum and national testing investments makes such governance practicable but destined to educational failure. Politically, national curriculum might appear as suitably federated but there are likely to be many more problems emerge which then need to be steered much more closely and tightly than is comfortable for governments at any level.

The crucial curriculum problem in Australia is the widening gap between the achievement of those who meet and exceed benchmarks and those whose performance is falling well below benchmark in highly predictable social groups. A national syllabus document does not guarantee successful engagement and achievement. A document does not provide for diversity of resources, student body, family educational background and experiences, or community location. There are more substantial differences in the curriculum experienced within any state between an elite private school and a poor rural school, staffed largely with first year teachers, or between a large metropolitan school and a small school down the road. National curriculum, particularly in its current form, is not going to alter that. Yet these differences need attention if the goals in the Melbourne Declaration are to be achieved.

Currently the high-stakes testing environment, a standardised, year-level prescribed content, and an as yet to be prescribed set of achievement standards all tend to work in centralist ways. In ignoring educational issues in favour of managing a political solution in search of a different educational problem, the collective and sequential groups of Ministers of education at State and Commonwealth levels have built a far bigger problem for themselves, one that is likely to come back and bite them hard. If schooling cannot address the crucial equity problem, there will be longstanding social cohesion problems and

ethical questions about the purposes of schools. Responding with further, relatively uninformed prescriptive measures – this content, that test, this timing – is likely to alienate teachers as well as students and their parents.

A different approach to curriculum is far more likely to engage students, as the productive pedagogies demonstrated in Queensland (Hayes et al. 2006). There are plenty of other curriculum precedents that draw on different assumptions about knowledge, relationships, teachers, students and parents, which have more of a chance to bring out world-class and more equitable curriculum engagement and student outcomes than the current approach.

Agreements across levels of government need to provide infrastructure for serious curriculum and pedagogical innovation at the school level, supporting and strengthening teacher engagement. Governance of education does not reside only with government representatives. Rather it has to be shared in ways which recognise the diversity of decisions and roles of all players. Schleicher (2008, p.74) notes that

Central prescription of what teachers should do will not transform teachers' practices in the way that professional engagement in the search for evidence of what makes a difference can. Central prescription of what teachers should do, will not transform teachers' practices in the way that professional engagement in the search for evidence of what makes a difference can.

Making space for such transformation cannot be prescribed in the governance approach taken to date. Hargreaves (1994) noted the paradox some years back, that at a time when there is increasing change in the external context, and many governments are carefully minimising their regulatory roles, the schooling sector is becoming more and more subject to tight regulations. The isomorphic tension between the changing context and the restrictive prescriptions is lived out in schools by teachers, students, administrators and schools. Instead of increased prescription of content and assessment, Scheicher puts up a different challenge for schooling systems:

to create a knowledge-rich profession in which those responsible for delivering educational services in the frontline have both the authority to act and the necessary information to do so intelligently, with access to effective support systems to assist them in serving an increasingly diverse client base of students and parents.

(Schleicher, 2008, p.85).

Despite the undoubted goodwill and hard work that has gone into getting national curriculum into its current state, national curriculum in Australia is in dire need of new, long-term agreements with the profession, the states and territories and with the potential to engage community. Unless these new agreements come into being, governance of curriculum is likely to limp along, continually in the media eye as a bone of contention between states, overly reliant on election cycles and unable to resource new curriculum directions for Australia's future. New kinds of curriculum governance that resources debate about intractable, longstanding problems such as equity and Indigenous education and assists teachers might even make a national curriculum worthwhile.

Table 1: Different Australian approaches to structuring official curriculum (adapted from Brennan 2001)

State subjects syllabus	CDC core curriculum (1980)	Key Learning Areas (1991)	Mayer's key competencies (1992)	UNESCO: Four pillars of lifelong learning (1994)	Essential Learnings / New Basics - examples	National curriculum
English Literature Physics Chemistry Biology General science Algebra Mathematics Geometry Geography Music Drama Pottery Painting Physical education History Geography Latin French German, Etc.	1. Arts and crafts 2. Environmental studies 3. Mathematical skills and reasoning and their applications 4. Social, cultural and civic studies 5. Health education 6. Scientific and technological ways of knowing and their social applications 7. Communication 8. Moral reasoning and action, value and belief systems 9. Work, leisure and lifestyles.	1. English 2. Mathematics 3. Science 4. SOSE 5. Technology 6. Arts 7. Health and PE 8. LOTE	1. Collecting, analysing and organising ideas and information 2. Using mathematical ideas and techniques 3. Planning and organising activities 4. Working with others and in teams 5. Using Technology 6. Solving problems 7. Expressing ideas and information	1. Learning to know 2. Learning to do 3. Learning to live together and with others 4. Learning to be	South Australia: -identities -thinking -Futures -interdependence Tasmania: -Thinking -Communicating -Personal -Futures - Social Responsibility -World Futures Qld. New Basics - Life pathways and social futures - Multiliteracies and communications media - Active citizenship - Environments and technologies	<u>First subjects:</u> 1. English 2. Mathematics 3. Science 4. History <u>Phase 2:</u> 5. Geography 6. Languages 7. The Arts <u>Phase 3:</u> 8. Design and technology 9. Health and physical education 10. ICT 11. Economics 12. Business 13. Citizenship <u>Cross-curriculum perspectives</u> - Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures - Asia & Australia's engagement with Asia - Sustainability

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State Subjects Syllabus	CDC Core Curriculum 1980	Key Learning Areas 1991	Mayer's Key Competencies 1992	UNESCO: Four Pillars of lifelong learning 1994	Essential Learnings/New Basics	National curriculum subjects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Literature Physics Chemistry Biology General science Algebra Mathematics Geometry Geography Music Drama Pottery Painting Physical education History Geography Latin French etc 	10. Arts and crafts 11. Environmental studies 12. Mathematical skills and reasoning and their applications 13. Social, cultural and civic studies 14. Health education 15. Scientific and technological ways of knowing and their social applications 16. Communication 17. Moral reasoning and action, value and belief systems 18. Work, leisure and lifestyles.	9. English 10. Mathematics 11. Science 12. SOSE 13. Technology 14. Arts 15. Health and PE 16. LOTE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collecting, analysing and organising ideas and information Using mathematical ideas and techniques Planning and organising activities Working with others and in teams Using Technology Solving problems Expressing ideas and information 	Learning to know Learning to do Learning to live together and with others Learning to be	e.g. South Australia: -identities -thinking -Futures -interdependence e.g. Tasmania: -Thinking -Communicating -Personal -Futures - Social Responsibility -World Futures. e.g. New Basics, Qld Life pathways and social futures Multiliteracies and communications media Active citizenship Environments and technologies	<u>First subjects:</u> 5. English 6. Mathematics 7. Science 8. History <u>Phase 2:</u> 14. Geography 15. Languages 16. The Arts <u>Phase 3:</u> 17. Design and technology 18. Health and physical education 19. ICT 20. Economics 21. Business 22. Citizenship <u>Cross-curriculum perspectives</u> - Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures - Asia & Australia's engagement with Asia - Sustainability <u>General capabilities</u> Literacy, numeracy, ICT competence, critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence, ethical behaviours, intercultural understanding.

