

Introduction

The National Curriculum Project

According to the Australian constitution, education is a State and Territory responsibility. In the past, the various education bureaucracies jealously guarded their fiefdoms and resisted any intrusion from the federal government or other States. Each believed that it had the best possible prescription for the education of the young Australians who happened to be living within its borders. However, several developments in recent years have led to increasing levels of co-operation between the States on education matters. One form of this co-operation is the National Curriculum Project.

Not many people know much about this project - certainly not the teachers who will be expected to implement it should it eventuate. Indeed, there is accumulating evidence that the rules are being made up as the bureaucrats stumble along. One version of events has it that Mr John Dawkins, the federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, wants to implement a national system of standardised assessment as currently being inflicted upon English schools. In the new spirit of federal-State co-operation of the 1990s, the States could not just refuse and decided upon a stalling tactic in the best traditions of *Yes Minister*. This involved the development of a three step process. The first step involved the mapping of the entire K-12 curriculum in Australia to see what is in all our hundreds of curriculum policy and syllabus documents. The second step is the writing of a national curriculum statement in a number of specified curriculum areas. The third is the writing of assessment profiles in each of these areas to help education systems know if their students are achieving as expected.

The "mapping" of the Australian environmental education curriculum has recently been completed. However, a meeting of the Australian Education Council (all State, Territory and the federal Ministers of Education) in April 1991 decided to amalgamate the environmental education and social education projects for the writing of the national statement and assessment profiles. So, a new curriculum area was born - Studies of Society and Environment. Strong representations by the AAEE Executive resulted in the national statement teams for Science, Technology and Health also being requested to incorporate an environmental education perspective in their work.

However, a very important issue for environmental educators is this: Should they be involved in a process that is likely to see the incorporation of environmental education into the mainstream school curriculum? On one level, that would be great: compulsory environmental education for everyone!

However, what sort of environmental education would it be? Annette Greenall Gough has traced the "snakes and ladders" history of environmental education in Australia since 1970 in a number of papers. She has shown how the critical values and social participation aspects of environmental education have usually been deleted and diluted every time environmental education received strong government attention, became flavour of the month and was effectively "colonised" by opportunists. Might not caution and the defence of the critical

values and social participation aspects of environmental education be a more ethical and responsible approach for environmental educators to adopt when governments start wanting to introduce a national curriculum? But, then, would we be running the risk of being left out in the cold and vacating the field for the opportunists entirely? These are the sorts of issues discussed by the panellists.

Environmental education, as a term, was first recognised in Australia in 1970 at the Australian Academy of Science conference on *Education and the Human Environment* but that this does not mean that students had not been learning about the environment in science, geography, art, English, nature study and other subjects long before then. This was also the year that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources adopted its definition of environmental education :

Environmental education is a process of recognising values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness among man (sic), his culture and his biophysical surroundings. Environmental education also entails practice in decision-making and the self-formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality.

The key word in this definition is “process” which means that environmental education is distinguished not so much by its content as by the processes involved in achieving its aims; and that this process orientation distinguishes environmental education from many other subject areas, be they specific disciplines or integrated environmental studies, in which the learning of content is paramount. The point is that environmental education is concerned with developing positive attitudes towards the environment and with providing practice in skills which, together, can enable people to make informed decisions about the environment and appropriate lifestyle choices. That is why a socially-critical education *for* the environment is superior to the inherently conservative approaches of education *about* the environment and education *in* the environment.

All prominent Australian environmental educators argue that it is only when the real intention of a programme is education *for* the environment that environmental education is actually happening and all the objectives of environmental education have a chance of being addressed. Education *about* and *in* the environment are valuable only in so far as they are being used to provide knowledge and skills which support socially-critical education *for* the environment but, of themselves, cannot be considered environmental education.

The Panel Presentations

The four panel presentations address the contested terrain of national curriculum initiatives in environmental education in the light of this socially-critical view of environmental education and the associated issues and difficulties of curriculum implementation.

Annette Greenall Gough addresses the political expediency of previous national initiatives in environmental education. She reconceptualises her “snakes

and ladders” history to describe the development of environmental education in Australia as a series of waves and troughs - with the troughs always coming fast on the heels of the waves (to mix a metaphor or two) as the opportunists discover a new “flavour of the month” or find the rigorous socially-critical orientations of environmental education not for their conservative palates. Annette left us on the crest of the third wave of the national curriculum project but with a number of questions. Will the national curriculum statement for Studies of Society and Environment deliver the goods? Will environmental education survive another trough in the early 1990s? Would we need a fourth wave in a few years time?

Greg Hunt who convened the team which “mapped” environmental education for the national curriculum project writes of the dilemmas involved in being caught in the middle - an education department bureaucrat with a job to do - but afraid of the use to which his work would be put - but too afraid to back out because of his fears of what someone who was uncritical of the process would do to environmental education. I know how Greg feels. In 1987 I was asked by the Bicentennial Australian Studies Schools Project to write some guidelines for teaching about the Australian environment during 1988. I wanted nothing to do with the shame of the bicentennial of the British invasion but after much soul-searching agreed to participate. What moved me was fear of what someone who was uncritical of the bicentennial celebrations would write because the guidelines were going to be distributed to every school in the country. It was a chance to “cut ‘em off at the pass” - and that is what Greg has been trying to do from within the national curriculum project.

In his paper Greg describes the process of mapping the environmental education curriculum in Australia from the perspective of the “intended” curriculum of policy and syllabus documents. The third panel member, Steve Malcolm, writes of his experiences in environmental education from the perspective of the “enacted” curriculum. In particular, Steve describes his work in developing the social action aspects of environmental education both in the classroom, himself, and now in his position on the Victorian Environmental Education Council.

Noel Gough is the fourth panel member. Noel writes from what he describes as a “post-modernist” perspective and shows us how the intentions of the senior bureaucrats and politicians behind the national curriculum project could be deconstructed through an analysis of the sort of language they use. Noel’s is a most valuable contribution. He argues that the purpose of curriculum policies in any field is to articulate and legitimate one version of education over, and at the expense of, others in order to establish moral and intellectual leadership in education and to impose a common frame of reference on educational practice. In so doing, Noel leaves us with a salutary note of caution about becoming too enthusiastic over the ‘third wave’ of environmental education in Australia and wondering about the type of environmental education that might be promoted in the national curriculum statement on Studies of Society and Environment!

Educational debates do not often stimulate my dreams but, the night after the panel presentations, I dreamt that a national curriculum statement that

advocated a socially-critical form of environmental education actually was written. But, then the nightmare started!

I dreamt that the senior education bureaucrats and politicians whose job it is to approve curriculum statements had a different reading of the words of the statement from that of its writers. You see, the writers knew that they had to be very clever with their words so that it could be an education *for* the environment policy that could also be approved within the “preferred readings” of their supervisors. Thus, I was left with the nightmare of a great sounding statement that was being read through Bakerite lenses and ordered to be implemented as a recipe for national testing and assessment in education *about* the environment.

Read on and see what you dream tonight!