REVIEW ESSAY

Getting beyond the 'hotch-potch of competing agendas[i]': the need to develop a powerful curriculum for *all* young people

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In their introduction to *Curriculum in Today's World: Configuring Knowledge, Identities, Work and Politics,* Lyn Yates and Madeleine Grumet comment that curriculum is 'the program nations establish to prepare young people for the world' (p. 3). The plethora of factors that determine the nature of the knowledge that is required for 'the world' - current and imagined - provides the basis for the sixteen chapters that follow. Within the varying national contexts, there are many competing local and global interests asserting political, economic and cultural agendas with a view to influencing the knowledge- content of curricula. Frequently missing from such debates are the voices of educational theorists. Their attempts to influence curriculum reforms are often undermined by under resourcing and conservative resistance to change. This situation is made evident in the historical accounts of Australia's struggles to develop state curricula and eventually a national curriculum, presented in Yates', Collins' and O'Connor's *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas: State cultures and the big issues*. In this collection of seventeen chapters, contributors present a comprehensive analysis of major curriculum issues and initiatives dating from the mid-twentieth century through to the conceptualising of the current Australian Curriculum.

These two books bring together a broad range of respected writers who describe a wide range of curriculum initiatives, local and global, historical and contemporary; the result

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is a pastiche of curriculum decision-making increasingly shaped by interventionist national governments that now see educational policy as an important driver of their international reputations and economic competitiveness. After digesting the contents of these two comprehensive volumes, one is left feeling inclined to support Priestley's (2011) assertion that 'ill thought-out curriculum policy, driven by a hotch-potch of competing agendas and ignorant of coherent theoretical underpinnings has the potential to be detrimental to education' (p. 227). These two volumes challenge us to reflect upon the current, I believe, parlous state of curriculum formulation, and do better.

Curriculum in Today's World is Routledge's 2011 'World Yearbook of Education' and it makes an outstanding contribution to that Series. It is made up of four parts structured around the following themes: Curriculum and National/Global Identities; Curriculum, the Economy and Work; Curriculum and Knowledge; and, Curriculum Responses to Politics and Vulnerabilities. Lyn Yates also leads the editorial team (with Cherry Collins and Kate O'Connor) for *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas*. This volume is the outcome of an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project that investigated developments in Australian curriculum policy at state and federal level between 1975 and 2005. The perspectives of this book's various contributors combine to present a meticulous overview of Australia's curriculum history. In addition to its introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into four parts: Envisaging a new curriculum for new times; Who are the students – and should we have different curricula for different kinds of individuals?; When assessment comes into the picture; and, The public management of curriculum and the stories of curriculums that fall over. Given the weight of information provided in Yates' et al.'s two volumes, it is not possible to respond to all contributors in a review essay of this length. For the purposes of this paper, many of my examples are drawn from *Curriculum in Today's World* because it has a more global perspective. The following discussion responds to some broad curricular themes under the umbrella of 'defining the curriculum' in respect of *the nation*, *market interests* and *knowledge*. In so doing I draw upon poststructuralist and postcolonial theories.

Defining the curriculum: the nation

Yates', Collins' and O'Connor's *Australia's curriculum dilemmas: State cultures and the big issues* is a landmark historical text that documents one nation's struggles to define curriculum for specific locales and times, whilst gradually moving towards a national vision of the

knowledge and skills that young people need to negotiate the challenges of the future. Individual chapters have been provided by leading curriculum developers from the various Australian states. In most cases the writers have been key players in the curriculum initiatives they describe and their insider knowledge adds colour and depth to their narratives. This volume encourages reflection upon the efficacy and direction of diverse curriculum developments and educational questions including: the nature of knowledge and the purpose of education and assessment; disciplines *vs* essential learnings; outcomes education and key competencies and capabilities; vocational and academic conceptions of knowledge; assessment practices – school-based approaches *vs* external examinations; strategies to promote equity, social justice and school retention; the influence of specific social and economic contexts on curriculum reform; educational responses to neoliberalism; and, some reasons why curriculum reforms are so difficult to achieve. After reading the individual contributions one is left somewhere between despair in regards to the historical litany of promising ideas that failed; and, hope stemming from the dogged persistence and courage of reformers who continue to work for curriculum transformations despite the challenges.

National 'imaginaries'

In their concluding chapter to *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas*, the editors remind us that 'curriculum is inescapably about ideas and values … it is tied up with … hopes for … young people … and the future nation' (p. 323). They leave us with the thought that 'drives for an Australian curriculum also reflect the fact that this is a period of renewed focus on the *nation* itself, on *who we want to be*' (p. 325 emphasis added). In a less globalized era, such a project may have been viable but in the 21st century national borders are malleable. Globalization is a complex mix of parallel and contradictory processes that manifest uniquely within different contexts. It simultaneously unites as it fragments and polarizes. It encourages cosmopolitan identities that transcend ethnicity and culture, while at the same time engendering a return to indigenous 'authenticity' and national identity. Just as some people embrace the possibilities of multi-connectivity across the globe, others seek closer ties with cultural roots. Today's nations, particularly those founded during an era of European colonialism must contend with the identity politics of their increasingly multicultural constituents, as well as forging connections to a myriad of global communities, virtual and otherwise.

Indeed, one of the recurrent sub-texts of these volumes is the question of how and in what ways national identity is embedded in curriculum documents. In Chapter 4[ii] of

Curriculum in Today's World, Elizabeth Macedo interrogates the discourses of Brazilian citizenship articulated in curriculum polices developed in that nation since the end of the military dictatorship in the early 1980s. In so doing, she examines the ways in which the notion of 'citizenship' has been politically mobilized in ambiguous ways to hide inequalities and present an image of Brazil as a democratic nation concerned with issues of social justice. In her analyses, Macedo draws on Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, Derrida's concept of *différance* (1981, 1989) and Bhabha's (1990, 2004) concept of 'third space'. In order to explore the politico-cultural assumptions and intents underpinning curriculum initiatives I have also found these theories to be extremely useful.

Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory argues that language and discourse constitute and construct the 'realities' of our worlds. This theory looks at the ways in which the meanings of objects, subjects, identities and events are socially constructed. Thus, systems of meaning are always contingent. The application of this theory on a national scale suggests that national identity is an invention, an imposition of unity: a vision of an imagined community constructed by the dominant discourses particular to each time and place. The discourses mobilized to construct such meanings may be utilized to effect the use of political power, creating 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Derrida's (1981, 1989) notion of différance further invites us to investigate the way in which such affirmations of identity simultaneously construct an 'other', possibly excluded, marginalized and constituted as inferior or a threat to the dominant group. If the difference of 'otherness' ascribed to those around us is attributed qualities of inferiority, lack and/or deviance, this translates into cultural and class dominance. Thus, within the context of globalization and increasing national hybridity (see for example, Archer et al., 2008), it is clearly problematic to embed concepts of a unitary national identity in curriculum documents. In the politics of collective essentialism, identity is always relational, determined as much by who we are *not*, as who we are (Derrida, 1981, 1989). Mouffe (1994) points to the danger of such exclusionary consequences, asserting that, 'this situation tends to promote … focus on a new enemy: the internal enemy represented by immigrants, particularly those who differentiate themselves by their ethnic origin or religion' (103). In the contemporary Australian context, this observation applies even more acutely to refugees.

Georgina Tsolidis (Chapter 2) describes such 'exclusionary consequences' in contemporary Australian social contexts within which Muslims and Arabs are the new 'other'. Such 'othering' has been fuelled, she argues, by the visual impact of the burqua and hijab. Tsolidis also foregrounds the role of curriculum in presenting 'notion(s) of the child

projected onto the nation' eliciting such questions as 'which children' and 'which Australia (nation) is being projected to our students through curriculum?' (emphasis added, p. 24). If curriculum is to 'narrate the nation' it has to find ways to accommodate the nuances of cultural differences or risk the kinds of social tensions cited by Tsolidis, such as the racially inspired riots at beachside Cronulla in Sydney in 2005[iii]. Thus, developing a curriculum that is inclusive of 'the stranger within' (Bauman, 2004) presents an, as yet, unresolved dilemma for curriculum writers.

The marginalizing effects of attempts to define a dominant national identity in the curriculum underpin the concerns of Tsolidis and Macedo, but also those of Tariq Rahman in Chapter 12. His deconstruction of the 'other' as represented in Pakistani textbooks and Islamic literature raises serious questions in respect of what he calls 'a garrison state mentality' (p. 187) that is anti-India and anti-West. In a similar vein, Eyal Naveh (Chapter 14) contends that within the Israeli history curriculum there is a deliberate goal of inculcating 'ties with Zionism and the state of Israel as a Jewish national homeland and as a unique, sovereign state' (p. 221) that also echoes a siege mentality. In contrast, William Pinar (Chapter 3) describes the challenge faced by Canadian curriculum writers in rationalising simultaneous impulses towards nationalism and a globally-oriented 'cosmopolitanism'. He skilfully explores the tensions at the interface between Canada's desire to distance itself from the bullish nationalism and anti-multicultural stance of the Unites State, while still crafting an appropriate 'pride of country' that incorporates Canada's desire to portray itself as a globally-engaged citizen. Karseth and Sivesind (Chapter 5) claim that globalization is undoubtedly working to transform curriculum policies of nations and they pose the following questions: 'Is cultural heritage of significance for what is conceptualised as a world culture? If so, how is the selection of this culture legitimised?'(p. 72). Such questions have led to tensions within and among nations that seek to delimit the national *Zeitgeist*[iv] Attempts to define the national identity in curriculum documents must also confront over three decades of postcolonial theory evident in the works of writers such as Edward Said (1993), Stuart Hall (1996), Homi Bhabha (2004) and Gayatri Spivak (1988)*.* Writers in the field of postcolonial theory stridently dispute the politics of representation that attempts to 'fix' identities within the dominant discursive and cultural practices of societies.

In defining curriculum, Macedo also evokes Bhabha's (1990, 2004) concept of a 'third space' of hybridity and re-negotiation of race and ethnicity (among other differences). In the conceptual environs of a 'third space' of identity formation, identity may be founded within the possibilities and processes of interacting differences and discourses. Being *un*fixed, one's

identity is not forced into essentialist loyalties and antagonistic exclusions. Hybridity is therefore a potential bridge across borders, a disruption that destabilizes the imposed categorization of power and dominance. These are serious issues for curriculum writers who need to problematize the discourses that construct images of *one* nation; and, instead, situate projects of identity articulation within a global/local context of 'Bakhtinian dialogic exchange' (see Clark and Holquist, 1984) in order to discover that 'third space' of identity construction. However, there is ample evidence within Yates et al.'s two volumes that indicates that nations have yet to accommodate such a notion. In Chapter 1 of *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas,* for example, we learn how in the early 2000s, Prime Minister John Howard and his Education Minister Brendan Nelson tied state education funding to publically displayed statements of 'approved Australian values' in schools, along with flag poles and (jingoistic) symbols of 'Australian identity' such as Simpson and his donkey[v]. Such texts may be called into the service of a 'governing metaphor' (Yeatman, 1994) of *who we are* in order to legitimate the hegemony of particular groups within society; the 'disciplining' (Foucault, 1977) effect of such texts and discourses works to suppress counter-narratives to officially sanctioned 'truths'.

Defining the curriculum: for the market

As previously discussed, poststructuralist discourse theory argues that language and discourse constitute and construct the 'truths' of our worlds. Thus, the legitimation of particular discourses (over others) that define key elements of a curriculum enables the exercise of power over the nature and direction of education. For example, according to Bernstein (1971, p. 47) 'how a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control'. Englund (2011) applies this theory to his analysis of educational policy in Sweden; in particular, he suggests that it is in 'vocabulary struggles' that language is used to effect political changes in the nature and direction of education in that nation. Citing the displacement of the concept of 'professional responsibility' by 'professional accountability' (for example) in policy documents, Englund (2011, p.197) argues that such linguistic changes also transform the construction of public understandings about the purposes and organisation of education. Such a reorientation of education to the market is the subject of Ann-Marie Bathmaker's chapter.

In her analysis of England's Work-Related Learning policy, Ann-Marie Bathmaker (Chapter 7) is concerned about the emergence of educational discourses that favour a market

ethos. She sees a focus on concepts such as 'employability' and 'enterprise skills' leading to a colonization of secondary education by the market, claiming that 'the purpose of Work-Related Learning might be seen as orienting schools and young people towards business interests. What is at stake is the *subject formation of young people in the interests of the economy*' (p. 96). Those young people who do not exhibit the desired 'attributes' of enterprise and employability are constructed in discourses of deficit and criticised by capitalist industry, as noted in the UK's Confederation of British Industry (2007):

> Time and again, UK businesses have expressed frustration with the competencies of many of the young people emerging from full-time education … over 50% of employers reported that they were not satisfied with the generic employability skills of school leavers and almost a third had the same issue with graduates (Chapter 7, p. 101)

Bathmaker's concern is that England's Work-Related Learning policy is more about changing the *dispositions* of young people, rather than providing them with actual work-related *skills*. As such, she asserts that ' the pursuit of Work-related Learning may be seen as attempts to change the values, culture and practices of formal education, orienting both schools and young people towards an unquestioning and uncritical acceptance of business and industry interests' (p. 105). Her chapter is a stark reminder to governments of the need to ask the following questions: *Whose interests* are served and what *kinds of futures* are being articulated in educational policies?

Jason Tan (Chapter 6) addresses such questions in respect of Singapore's education system. According to Tan, in Singapore, 'academic achievement [is constructed] as [a] primary indicator of an individual's societal worth' (p. 85). Such discourses are supported by generally held beliefs in the 'primarily genetic basis of an individual's intelligence, creativity and leadership qualities' (p. 85). Thus 'success' and 'failure' are constructed as individual responsibilities. According to Tan, these discourses exacerbate the segregation of students and the stratification of schools that has already been created by the marketization of education in Singapore. Competitiveness in schooling extends into the workforce as indicated by Chew (1997, cited in Tan, Chapter 6, p. 90):

> The message is clear: if an individual and a small nation-state are to survive in a highly competitive world, then they must work smartly and 'try to keep ahead of the pack'. Herein lies the strongest driving force in Singaporean society, a force that encourages unbridled competition and selfish individualism, and one that is reflected in the education system.

Tan describes a state education system that, despite initiatives such as Education Minister Goh's 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (p. 80), which attempted to shift the focus of education away from reliance on competitive examinations, schools continue to serve as 'sorting and sifting' mechanisms (p. 91) for the most successful global enterprises and Singapore still struggles with the socio-economic inequalities and cultural challenges of globalization. The understandings created in respect of the focus and purposes of education clearly have social justice implications. In particular, we have to review the orientation of the curriculum and the kinds of knowledge that young people have access to and query whether we allow *all* young people access to what might be deemed to be what Michael Young (Chapter 9) refers to as 'powerful' knowledge.

Defining the curriculum: knowledge choices

Curriculum decisions are concerned with knowledge selection and knowledge representation; particular selections create some realities and deny others; and, ultimately such decisions define whose interests are served by the officially sanctioned curriculum. Curriculum decisions are clearly vehicles for ideologies: ideologies that maintain the status quo or are oppressive or liberating – but never neutral.

Miantao Sun and Jiang Yu (Chapter 8) explore the influence that ideology may have on curriculum decisions in their discussion of the transformation of China's education system after the so-called 'Reform and Opening Up' policy of 1978. Along with a reorientation of the economy following Mao's death, China embarked on educational changes designed to change schools from 'educational factories' to 'learning communities' (p. 109). The authors contrast curriculum offerings during China's Cultural Revolution with those which followed the reform, claiming:

> The curriculum of basic education in mainland China before the Reform and Opening Up … just considered students as teaching objects … making too many restrictions and constraints on them, which seriously affected enthusiasm, initiative and creativity. It emphasized a collective and uniform political set of values that students should acquire, but weakened their scientific knowledge and ability to innovate … The new curriculum is directed towards developing students to learn to cooperate, to learn to survive and to learn to be … The function of the new curriculum … is about developing citizens who can be creative and innovative and can adapt to the social, technological and economic development of the twenty-first century (p. 119)

While it is clear that China's 'Reform and Opening Up' policy discarded Maoist dogma, it is also evident that this nation has embraced another ideology, a Chinese version of neoliberal

capitalism that now informs curriculum decisions; an orientation expressed in the oxymoronic concept of 'market socialism'. China remains a one-party state that tightly controls the individual freedom of its citizens, so it has not embraced a classical form of liberalism that champions the rights of the individual; however, it has found that the ideology of *neo*-liberal *economics* is quite compatible with its authoritarian ethos. According to Olssen (1996):

> In neo-liberalism the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur …. In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism, then, there is a further element added, for such a shift involves a change in subject position from 'homo economicus', who naturally behaves out of self-interest, and is relatively detached from the state, to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive'. (p. 340).

Hence, it may be argued that educational policy in China is still very much in the service of the official *economic* ideology of the state.

Within western democracies the question of knowledge-selection for the curriculum has devolved in recent times to a policy debate about the best way to prepare young people for a so-called 'knowledge society' – one premised on high levels of skills, 'flexible' workers and an ability to cope with the rapidity of new knowledge creation necessitating an aptitude for life-long learning. Michael Young (Chapter 9) points out the lack of a clear definition of the actual 'knowledge' that is required by a 'knowledge society'. He goes on to critique national and international trends in curriculum construction towards, what he calls *genericism*. A 'generic' curriculum is one that is organised around notions of 'capabilities' that are deemed to be relevant to many occupations; for instance, 'the ability to criticize, to conceptualize, to connect and to compare' (p. 129). Young makes the argument that such curricula merely serve to advantage those young people who are *already* advantaged. He believes there are serious social justice implications that flow from this:

> By evacuating the knowledge content of the curriculum they reduce the possibility of schools widening access to 'powerful knowledge' and in effect and despite their intentions, complement the wider reproductive processes of society (p. 135)

Young is concerned that a generic curriculum loses its emancipatory possibility because it 'weakens content' at the expense of 'powerful knowledge' that is still the priority of elite schooling institutions. It is his view that generic curricula deny students access to disciplinary knowledge, to the 'contents that give meaning and purpose to conceptual processes' (p. 129).

Gert Biesta (2012) echoes this concern in his analysis of what he has called the 'learnification' of education:

> The educational demand is *not* that students learn but that they learn *something* and that they do so for particular reasons … the discourse of learning only becomes an *educational* discourse when we ask questions about the content and purpose of learning – the learning 'of what' and 'for what' (p. 583 original emphasis)

Biesta (2012) also makes a distinction between education and training, associating 'education' with processes that are far from predictable and almost impossible to quantify. He says, 'education always anticipates the freedom of those being educated, which is an important reason for not wanting to treat students simply as material to be moulded or as objects to be trained' (p. 585). These ideas challenge the blunt instrumentalism of many political and media debates about education.

Concluding remarks

Taken together, *Curriculum in Today's World: Configuring Knowledge, Identities, Work and Politics,* and *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas: State cultures and the big issues,* provide a formidable amount of information about curriculum decisions and the policies that shape them. While *Curriculum in Today's World* presents the reader with a variety of national developments worldwide, *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas* provides a longitudinal view of one nation's journey in respect of curriculum developments. Between them, these two volumes address an abundance of matters pertinent to the challenging task of creating curricula and the special challenges of the globalizing present. It is clear from reading the many chapters that curriculum decisions are frequently based upon nationalistic, economic, religious, and/or classist motivations. Assumptions about the relative value of different forms of knowledge also shape curriculum decisions. Different interest groups compete for influence over what the next generation should learn and often it is those who have the loudest voices that hold sway. Apparently absent in the debates is a foundation of curriculum theory that makes explicit the assumptions, beliefs, values and interests of influential players. Curriculum decisions are central to democracy and social justice and therefore it is important to deconstruct the language of curriculum debates, to shine the light of critical inquiry upon their discourses so as to better understand the assumptions embedded in educational policies that are shaping the lives of young people. The two volumes reviewed in this essay illuminate

the complexity inherent in curriculum decisions and strongly suggest the need for a 'powerful curriculum' for *all* young people.

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[i] Priestley, 2011, p. 227.

[ii] From this point on, unless otherwise stated, chapter numbers refer to *Curriculum in Today's World.*

[iii] In December 2005, an estimated 5000 Australians took over the beach at Cronulla in Sydney. Many were fuelled by alcohol and some sections of the crowd became violent as they waved the national flag and attacked anyone who looked Middle Eastern in appearance. In the preceding week there had been several clashes between young Middle Eastern men and life-savers on the beach.

[iv] Zeitgeist – essence/spirit of a particular place/time

[v] John Simpson – a stretcher bearer at the battle of Gallipoli in WW1. He became a national hero for his bravery under fire in rescuing, with his donkey, wounded Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) soldiers

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