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# The Australian curriculum: History – the challenges of a thin curriculum?

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The *Australian Curriculum: History* has emerged out of a neoliberal federal education policy landscape. This is a policy landscape where pragmatic and performative, rather than pedagogic, concerns are clearly foregrounded, and this has implications for curriculum development and implementation. A useful way to conceptualise the features, assumptions and potentialities of the *Australian Curriculum: History* that has been produced from these policy imperatives is through a framework provided by the descriptors, ‘thin’ and ‘thick’. A thin curriculum is one that essentially equates curriculum with a product, and where prescribed content is central to understanding what a curriculum is. A thick curriculum, on the other hand, is one where the curriculum is understood as a verb, where the details of content are secondary to an exploration of bigger questions and concepts and where curriculum theory is the starting point for the selection of content. The use of ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ as the ends of a continuum of curriculum provides insights into the purposes of a curriculum. Ultimately such a dichotomy exposes assumptions about what is important knowledge and who is in control of the curriculum. This paper focuses on how the *Australian Curriculum: History* as an example of a ‘thin’ curriculum, presents a number of challenges.

**Keywords:** Australian curriculum; neoliberalism; Australian education policy; ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ curriculum

## Introduction

In this article I want to argue that the *Australian Curriculum: History* (7–10) represents a ‘thin’ curriculum that has emerged from a federal policy landscape dominated by a neoliberal agenda. It will be claimed that the interests of human capital and global economic prerogatives as expressed in national policies, including the *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools* (DEWR, 2008) have straddled, defined and reduced the *Australian Curriculum: History* (from years 7–10), to a pragmatic, technicist, or ‘thin’ curriculum, rather than a pedagogically robust, or ‘thick’ curriculum. It will be argued that this approach to curriculum design and development has created a number of challenges: the problematic understanding that curriculum is essentially a product, overwhelmingly concerned with content; a restrictive pedagogic framing of teachers’ work that diminishes the status and autonomy of teachers; and the manner in which students are excluded from curriculum development.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section will provide a brief overview of the policy landscape from which the Australian Curriculum has emerged

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with a particular focus on the Rudd government's Education Revolution, as articulated in *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools* (2008). The second section will describe the theoretical orientation of a thin and thick curriculum that has been used by Geertz (1973) and may be usefully applied to the field of curriculum. The third section will link this theoretical orientation to the key features of the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010b), including references to the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum, v 2.0, v 3.0* (ACARA, 2010a, 2011) and the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (2009) (the Shape Papers) which assisted in framing the history curriculum. The fourth section will identify a number of challenges, such as the centrality of content, the lack of acknowledgement of the place of pedagogy, and the exclusion of students' voices and realities, that this curriculum has created. The conclusion will claim that these challenges will need to be addressed if we are to provide opportunities for an engaging, robust and thick curriculum.

### **Broader policy context of the Australian curriculum: History**

The Australian curriculum sits within a broad global and national education policy context. The *Australian Curriculum: History* (ACARA, 2010) has been introduced as one part of a national overhaul of education that can be directly tied to a number of reports, including the *Future of Schooling in Australia* report (DPC, 2007) and the Senate Inquiry report into the *Quality of School Education* (2007), as well as data from international testing regimes, that preceded or emerged from the Rudd Government's *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools* (DEWR, 2008). This is a policy context that is characterised by increasing federal involvement in defining and shaping the nature and purpose of school education in what Ball (cited in Lingard, 2010, p. 132) describes as 'neoliberal policy frames'. In such a policy framework neoliberal priorities attached to controlling what goes on in education (and not just in curriculum) and the importance of market forces in deciding these priorities are featured. Lingard (2010) has claimed that the Rudd Education Revolution represented a 'strengthening of the national presence in schooling' (p. 129) and saw 'the economisation of education policy as part of the national productivity agenda' (p. 143).

The focus and intent of this policy context is summarised in the foreword of *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools* (DEWR, 2008) where it is stated that 'education [is] at the very heart of Australia's economic and social investment priorities' and it was the government's intention to put in place an 'agreed national framework for education reform ... [including] a comprehensive set of aspirations, outcomes, progress measures and future policy directions' (p. 5). It goes on to argue that

All students in Australian schools should have access to a comprehensive national curriculum that sets out the knowledge, understanding, skills and values they should acquire. Such a curriculum will establish what is needed for high standards of achievement and for students to be fully prepared for life and work beyond school (p. 23).

And furthermore,

Sustaining the economy's growth rate in the future will depend on increasing our productive capacity and in particular the productivity of Australian workers (p. 35).

In addition, OECD policy advice and rankings in international testing regimes such as the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) has assumed increasing importance, where ‘Australia should be challenged by those ahead [in PISA rankings] ... if we are to be prosperous community in the future’ (*The Future of Schooling*, 2007, p. 9). Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor (2005) suggest that this reliance on international testing ‘can be seen to constitute a new global space for educational policy’ (p. 16) in that Australia’s position and ranking in such tests is perceived to be indicative of the quality and quantity of learning achieved by Australian students and thus the overall quality of education provided by its schools. While such rankings on the one hand might be an interesting source of school systems’ evaluation on specific skills, such as literacy, they become much more than this when the rankings are viewed as inextricably tied to how well we measure up against other countries and ultimately what this portends about the quality of our future workforce and the status of our education system in a global market where education accounts for considerable export income. In the case of the latter claim, such a perspective fails to acknowledge the multitudinous social and emotional functions of schooling for young people.

This phenomenon, the convergence of the interests of education with the interests of the economy and the ‘constitution of a national education policy field’ (Lingard et al., 2005, p. 132) has taken place through a process of what Lingard calls ‘policy borrowing’. That is, what is happening in school education elsewhere in the developed world, especially in the UK and USA, is transported wholesale to Australia. The problem however, as Lingard (2010) has claimed, is that policy borrowing from international sources requires an evaluation of its original effectiveness and then a consideration of local contexts and issues that will impact on its effectiveness once it has been transported (p. 132). In recent government policy on education in Australia, ‘transportation’ of policy has not been associated with transformation of policy to local contexts or, more importantly, undergone rigorous scrutiny about policy effectiveness and limitations.

Even more importantly, this policy background does not scrutinise key issues around the nature of curriculum because these are assumed to be unproblematic and shared. In the context of the Australian Curriculum, this means that ‘key decisions about curriculum philosophy and paradigm have already been made’ (Luke, Wood, & Weir, 2013, p. 3) prior to more public discussions about what curriculum is and what it should contain. What is left over is just a little space for debate and consultation over the tailings of content, rather than fundamental questions surrounding the ideology and the architecture of curriculum. These latter aspects are the formidable planks around which those curriculum details might be positioned yet these are the planks of policy that are rarely scrutinised.

For the purposes of this article, such a policy framework clearly articulates the direction and purpose of school education to develop human capital along the lines of pragmatic and economic, rather than pedagogic, interests. The policy landscape in which the Australian Curriculum has been forged has been dominated by neoliberal policies where decisions to be made about curriculum have been determined by pragmatic market driven agendas and international ‘policy borrowing’. At issue, however, is the extent to which curriculum design has been pre-determined and pre-conceived in an unproblematic and self-evident manner. Using the *Years 7–10 Australian Curriculum: History* as an example, what I want to argue is that the Australian Curriculum that has emerged is a thin curriculum. This thin curriculum presents considerable challenges for teachers and students because it forecloses richer

and thicker understandings of curriculum design that emphasise student ‘engagement’ over student ‘performance’.

### **Thick and thin: A theoretical orientation to curriculum**

The way in which I use the notion of a ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ curriculum in this article loosely draws on the work of Geertz (1973) and later, Shankman (1984) whose use of these descriptors in anthropology and qualitative research highlighted the importance of analysing phenomena from a number of perspectives so that an outsider may deduce meaning. In anthropology and in qualitative research, a common device for exploring meaning is through the lens of thin or thick descriptors. Geertz (1973), credited with first using these terms, argued that even a simple act such as winking, may be interpreted in any number of ways, depending on the context or the cultural norms that may apply when winking in a particular situation. He claimed that it is insufficient that a single interpretation (or, a thin interpretation) of an act be unconditionally accepted because there may be a multiplicity of interpretations to explain its use (or, a thick interpretation). Put simply, if ‘thinness’ in qualitative research is about asking questions prefaced with ‘what’, ‘where’ or ‘when’, ‘thickness’ is concerned with questions around ‘why’, ‘how’ or ‘what if’. This latter set of words demands much deeper and more nuanced responses and forces us to recognise the centrality of context and interrogate phenomena at a deeper, and less predictable, level.

Others have applied Geertz’s dichotomy of thin and thick descriptors in different fields. Barber (2004) and Zyngier (2010) have referred to ideas around thick (strong) and thin (weak) democracy; Walzer (1994) has used these terms in reference to ideas of morality, social justice and identity; Dubnick (2003) has referred to thin and thick notions of professional accountability; Gandin and Apple (2005) as well as Carr (2008) have applied these terms in democratic education for social justice. While the application and details of thin and thick descriptors varies according to the field in which it has been applied, each of these authors uses thin and thick in ways that enable an analysis of phenomena from the superficial (thin) or, the what, the where and the when, to the more complex, deeper and nuanced (thick) — the how, the why and the what if that may inhere in different contexts. More importantly, when such a framework is applied to curriculum, additional assumptions may be exposed.

There are several overt and interrelated characteristics that apply when analysing a thin and a thick curriculum. In terms of a thin curriculum, a key overt feature is that the curriculum is considered to be a product, a noun; something that is, and this serves to camouflage the idea that ‘curriculum is deceptively complicated’ (Yates, 2011, p. 3). Second, and related to this point, the curriculum focuses on the provision of prescribed content and skills to be learned — the what. This feature ultimately becomes the central and defining characteristic, the beginning and the end point, of what a curriculum is. Third, any content and skills, determined by a distant source, arise out of pragmatic concerns, rather than being based on theories of curriculum, or central and agreed values, or from a base that is grounded in and emerges from the pedagogical work of teachers (Grundy, 1987).

In contrast, a ‘thick’ curriculum is defined by its orientation to ‘process’, or curriculum conceptualised as a verb. A thick curriculum is one where the central and dominating focus is on the principles and assumptions associated with teaching and learning so that the theory of curriculum on which it is based is central and explicit

and where pedagogical considerations — the how — are situated at the core of the curriculum. Second, in such a curriculum, details of content are limited because the focus is on big ideas, big questions, and concepts related to a learning area. A thick curriculum provides a minimal level of content prescription and detail because selection of content emerges from an articulated theoretical position about curriculum, about its values and about a subject. Third, in a thick curriculum, the details of content are more likely to recognise local ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzales, Moll, & Amante, 2005) that exist in local communities, the communities and cultures of young people and for those who implement the curriculum. This is because curriculum content can incorporate more than what is prescribed by remote others.

Underlying the characteristics of a thin and a thick curriculum as described above, is a set of assumptions about effective teaching and learning. These assumptions relate to the place of the teacher and the student in the process of curriculum decision-making, content selection and implementation. Ultimately, the characteristics and assumptions in a thin curriculum serve to reinforce and legitimise ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 1990). They ‘plant clear ideological flags’ (Luke et al., 2013, p. vii) in matters of content, and these also limit the pedagogical opportunities for teachers and students to imagine a different kind of, and use for, that content or, other, more local, knowledges. These are issues that will be discussed later in the article.

One way of representing the range of attributes associated with a thin and a thick curriculum may be shown in the table below. This framework itemises a number of key aspects of curriculum may be used to analyse the nature of curriculum expressed in the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010).

↔		
Thin Curriculum	Features	Thick Curriculum
conformity	<b>Goal of curriculum</b>	social transformation
assumed, role of pedagogy unacknowledged	<b>Curriculum theory</b>	articulated, detailed, pedagogy central
detailed, prescribed, sequential, academic	<b>Content and skills</b>	big ideas, concepts, and questions
product	<b>Curriculum as ...</b>	process
What? When? Where?	<b>Key words</b>	How? Why? What if?

Table 1: The Australian Curriculum: History

## The Australian Curriculum

Emerging from policy directions contained in the Education Revolution, the *Australian Curriculum: History* has been written in accordance with the parameters articulated in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum v. 2.0*, *v. 3.0* (2009, 2010) and the *Shape of the Curriculum: History* (2009) which describe the structure and organisation of the curriculum. These papers, authored by the Australian Curriculum,

Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) provide the rationale and guidelines from which the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) was written.

The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum v. 2.0 and v. 3.0* (2009, 2011) provide the 'policy background ... and what has been agreed about the structure and development of the Australian curriculum' (2010, p. 3). Included in this document are brief understandings about teaching, learning, assessing and reporting, the implementation process, quality assurance, and review. In each of these areas, with the exception of pedagogy, it is clear that ACARA has a 'defining role' (Ditchburn, 2012, p. 351) in structuring and defining the curriculum. It is stated that 'the curriculum is important in setting out what will be taught, what students need to learn and the quality of that learning' (2010, p. 6) and stresses the need for the 'scope and sequence for each learning area [to be] appropriately ordered [so that] unnecessary repetition is avoided' (2010, p. 18). It presents the curriculum 'as a continuum that makes it clear to teachers what is to be taught ... [while] ... schools and teachers will determine pedagogical ... considerations' (2010, p. 9). Further, the 'curriculum will articulate what is expected for all students' (2010, p. 11) and 'will establish high expectations for all students' (2010, p. 14).

In the Shape Papers it is clear that ACARA has a dominant role in determining the structure and content of the curriculum, and has clearly articulated the position of teachers (and students) within that structure. It also makes it clear the ways in which teachers might conform to the requirements articulated in the document. In this instance we can see that government has a clear idea of how education needs to be put to work in terms of broader agendas around national economic productivity.

In accordance with the guidelines established in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (2009), the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) provides information regarding how the history curriculum will be organised. This latter Shape Paper articulates understandings about the nature of history as a discipline, the uniqueness of historical methods and the importance to society of studying history (p. 4). As such, its focus is clearly on the nature of the discipline of history, rather than the translation of the discipline of history as part of a school curriculum. It states that 'factual knowledge is essential' because this forms the basis of 'understanding' history. It also states that the curriculum 'will be based on the interrelationship between historical knowledge, understanding and skills' (p. 6) and lists the concepts and skills that are considered central in the discipline of history.

Subsequent sections of the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (2009) describe the focus of the content that is appropriate for all students in each year level. The content is also framed around focus questions which are intended to 'enable students to consider local, state or territory, national and global history' within each topic (p. 8). Interestingly, the curriculum for Years 7–10 'will specify the required learning in terms of historical concepts, understandings and skills, through overview and depth studies' and teachers in some cases will have 'options ... to meet the interests and needs of their students' (p. 9). Later sections of *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (2009) refer to the need to incorporate a futures orientation that is 'focused on globalisation, the rise of the knowledge economy, the importance of sustainability, the rich diversity of Australian people and their distinctive position in the Asia-Pacific region' (p. 12), as well as the importance of students learning Australian history. Further, it states that the curriculum will provide 'flexibility and choice for teachers' and 'will allow for differences in interests, capabilities and future pathways for students' (p. 12). Connections to other learning

areas, general capabilities, cross curriculum perspectives and the importance of embedding digital technologies in the curriculum are referred to.

The *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) has been based on the guidelines provided in the Shape Papers and in common with each of the other subjects that currently form the Australian Curriculum, the organising framework for the history curriculum includes four sections: Rationale and Aims; Organisation; Curriculum Foundation-10; and Glossary.

By way of summary, the content in this curriculum has been organized into a ‘world history’ approach ‘within which Australian history is taught’ in order to ‘enhance appreciation of Australian history’ and the ways in which this knowledge may be used to ‘encourage active and informed citizenship’ ([www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/rationale](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/rationale)).

For instance, in the section called Curriculum: Foundation to Year 10, a detailed list of content is described. The Years 7 to 10 curriculum captures a sweep of global history over 5000+ years and features big narratives of global and national leaders and empires. It provides a snapshot of Australian history, mostly within a global context, from earliest human experience to the modern day. Key historical concepts and a list of topics (including overview and depth studies in the secondary years) and skills to be taught, together with indicative time allocations, are included at each year level. While there is considerably more flexibility in the primary history curriculum, what is important here is that the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) from Years 7 to 10 interprets curriculum to be a product — a complete and whole object that is assumed can be used in meaningful ways by all teachers across Australia.

The use of clearly demarcated layers of content and foci that characterises the curriculum articulates what all ‘students should be taught’ and ‘what students need to learn’. Such a perspective is based on the assumption that whatever is taught is therefore learned; and that learning necessarily takes place once something has been taught. Without an interrogation of what it means ‘to teach’ or to explore its connection with learning, the curriculum has been constructed with little acknowledgement of the problematic nature of curriculum development or the recognition that curriculum construction and development is essentially an organic or dynamic process that is inextricably tied to context. Such a perspective thus stands in contrast to the Shape Papers, which convey ‘the impression that [it contains] all that is necessary to meet the needs of every student’ (Brady & Kennedy, 2003, p. 29).

As a contained and demarcated object, it is presumed that the history curriculum can be used, with few adjustments, by both experienced and less experienced history teachers, for students in schools in the leafy eastern suburbs of Melbourne for example, to those in schools in tiny remote communities in the outback. It is presumed that a curriculum can actually achieve this if it is contained and complete and its boundaries are demarcated. Or, in the words of Giroux (1981) it is ‘objective, bounded and ‘out there’ ... and impersonal’ (p. 52). And while curriculum as a product as constructed in the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) may appear to be neat and ordered, the reality is that such an approach has the potential to distance many teachers and students from engaging in learning history. Rather than viewing curriculum as a ‘contextualised social process’, the curriculum is understood as a noun, or ‘pre-active’ (Reid, 2005, p. 11) and such an approach may well serve to be counterproductive. This is because the inclusion of consultation among teachers occurred around ‘technical rather than conceptual issues’ (Reid, 2005, p. 24). That is, the design phase including articulated understandings about curriculum theory and development, the rationale, the architecture, the structure of the curriculum were



either not featured in policy documents including the Shape Papers or only involved teachers at the tail end of curriculum development. Again, as Reid claims, such an approach to the role of teachers in curriculum development denies their professional knowledge and also construes curriculum development ‘as a political rather than an educational exercise’ (Reid, 2005, p. 23). As Luke et al. (2013) state, ‘curriculum theory enables principled arguments for curriculum content’ (p. 8) yet such a perspective has not been featured in the *Australian Curriculum: History*.

It is clear that the Shape Papers and the curriculum itself assume that curriculum is a product. Without reference to any curriculum theory, the documents have by implication, assumed that the understandings about what a curriculum is and what it can achieve are common and shared. Instead the curriculum has been constructed as ‘a concrete entity or tangible thing’ that can be ‘captured and studied independent of context’ (Johnson & Reid, 1999, pp.viii, xii). While it is stated in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (2009), that the curriculum is intended to be ‘sufficiently rich and descriptive’, it is also designed to ‘avoid excessive prescription’. While such a position suggests the importance of order and efficiency, a ‘scope and sequence’ so that time wasting is minimised, it also equally suggests constriction and conformity — especially in the highly prescriptive Years 7 to 10 curriculum.

## **Discussion: Challenges arising**

The construction of the curriculum as a product presents a number of overlapping challenges for teachers and classrooms that are each related to the notion of a thin curriculum. The first of these is connected to the challenge of implementing a scripted and prescriptive curriculum; the second is the likely domination of what I call ‘a pedagogy of speed’ in the implementation of the curriculum; the third is the challenge presented by the ‘absence’ of students.

### ***1. The challenge of prescriptive and scripted content***

The *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) is characterised by sequential lists of content and skills, prescribed from a distance, for all students to learn. The basis of selection of content clearly emerges from an uncontested understanding of the epistemology of history as a discipline and pragmatic considerations such as a focus on issues associated with and the effects of globalisation, rather than as grounded in curriculum theory, or a considered and defensible articulation of agreed values or effective teaching and learning (Reid, 2009).

Content and skills are defined and prescribed in the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010). The numerous layers of content in the curriculum include overview and depth studies (in the secondary curriculum) and their elaborations for each year level, historical concepts that may be developed for each year level, and lists of skills for pairs of year levels, cross curricula priorities and general capabilities to be implemented across the entire curriculum, and focus questions and achievement standards for each year level. These layers of content have two main consequences for teaching and learning that I want to elaborate. First, these layers of content create a ‘laminated effect’ so that ‘entry points’ for teachers to manipulate the curriculum for their students is blocked. The second point is that the provision of prescribed curriculum (especially in the compulsory secondary years) creates an ‘official

knowledge' that largely ignores the range and diversity of knowledge and experiences of students and their communities.

In reference to the first point, the thin and multiple layers of prescribed content create a laminated whole so that there is no visible or definable 'entry point' for teachers to make sense of where to begin, where the priorities are, where the starting points of curriculum development might be. That is, there is no explicit hierarchy of knowledge, despite the inclusion of the key historical concepts. Instead, it is a curriculum that overwhelms with layers of detail, items to be taught and perspectives to be inserted. However, it provides few theoretical signposts, such as might be considered if there were a curriculum theory underpinning content, to justify, and for teachers to negotiate, its terrain. The point is that while experienced history teachers may well be able to make reasoned approaches to the task of curriculum development in history, the curriculum itself does not acknowledge the complexity of this undertaking and the suggested criteria on which teachers, especially those not familiar with history as a discipline or those new to the profession, might use to make decisions about the priorities of content. The lack of experienced specialist history teachers and the increasing number of teachers being required to 'teach out of field' exacerbates this potential problem (McConney & Price, 2009).

This prescribed content, overlaid by other prescriptive requirements, creates a type of 'knowledge ceiling' that deflects the intrusion of content knowledge much beyond what has been decided and prescribed, because there is just so much to 'get through', to try to make sense of and to 'tick off' the checklist of content items. Again, while this may be the intention of the curriculum to ensure 'rigour' and 'performance', such a position ignores the importance of and the need for deep and long term student engagement and learning. Added to this, with few references beyond the brief achievement standards, to the nature of the assessments for which ACARA will ultimately be responsible, we can only speculate at this point about what students will (really) need to know.

In terms of the second point above, not only is there a pre-eminence accorded to content, but also the prescribed and sequential nature of this content is also problematic. It is problematic because the content is likely to foreground particular kinds of knowledge valued by those who created the curriculum. Or, as indicated in the *Quality Education* federal policy, it emphasises the need to 'ensure that we are teaching young people the right things in the right way' (2008, p. 13). What is right in this instance however may be challenged, and this will now be discussed.

Whilst knowledge of the content as prescribed may have value for some, when that knowledge is distant and its relevance mono-dimensional (related to global contexts) and essentially academic (including 'high expectations for all students'), then questions must be raised about its resonance for a diversity of students, their disparate present circumstances and multiple futures. These 'coercive policies' are imagined and constructed 'at arm's length' (Smyth, Angus, Down, & McInerney, 2009, p. 24) from those who will use the curriculum. Furthermore, a closer look at the level of content detail to be taught is reminiscent of Ball's (1993) assessment of the national history curriculum in the UK, where curriculum knowledge is distant from students because 'knowledge is valued precisely for its irrelevance, esotericism, detachment, elitism and intrinsic difficulty' (p. 201). Even if it is accepted that this official knowledge with its emphasis on big narratives and global stories is important for all students to know, there is a lack of alternative stories that might emerge when the filter for such stories shifts to a focus on those who are excluded from these

narratives, such as those associated with women or workers or others typically sidelined or excluded from commonly prescribed historical narratives used in schools.

This 'worthwhile knowledge' (Apple, 1990) dictates what is formally learned in schools and as a result, there will be a lack of space for content knowledge that may emerge 'in situ'. That is, such a curriculum is less likely to foreground knowledge or issues that emerge from more localized contexts. As Connell (1998) explains it, it is a competitive academic curriculum (CAC) that caters for an elite and serves to entrench social division. As Elmore and Sykes (1992) state, this is an example of a curriculum that values an 'orderly transmission' of knowledge and 'rewards conformity to correct outcome' (p. 207). Opportunities to create experiences that challenge the prescribed order, or to include content that strays from this prescription, will be limited, particularly in the compulsory secondary years. Not only is there insufficient room in the curriculum to welcome knowledge that arises from other sources or from the world inhabited by young people and their immediate cultures and communities, but that knowledge is not recognised as of value. As Smyth et al. (2009) claim –

... curricula often endorse the acquisition of knowledge and understandings deemed relevant to the national economy and business interests rather than the values, history, culture and economics of local communities (p. 32).

This not only results in a curriculum that is more about 'the what' rather than 'the why', but also serves to maintain the status quo and the interests of those who have decided what we all should know.

In a thin curriculum, knowledge, often expressed as esoteric knowledge, that is there to be learned and digested, rather than mulled over or 'problematized' (Elmore & Sykes, 1992, p. 197). It does not emerge from a 'dialectical relationship' nor is it the 'product of dialogue' (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 209) that fosters inquiry, investigation or the pursuit of deeper meaning or positioning students as (co-) constructors of knowledge. In this context we are reminded of Freire's (1970/1990) notion that knowledge is not a gift or a thing to be distributed but can best be achieved through exchange and dialogue in a process that enables meaning to be constructed. Here, we are reminded of Kincheloe's (2008) claim that 'The central role of schooling involves engaging students in the knowledge production process ... analysing, interpreting and constructing a whole variety of knowledges' (p. 3).

Almost as an afterthought or an aside, issues of currency and 'relevance' to current globalised world, regional and local contexts are addressed by the inclusion of the three cross-curriculum priorities and the seven general capabilities, but these do not constitute the 'real' curriculum that teachers will need to teach (and assess?). They exist and are recommended but do not form the central core of content that is required. That is, the curriculum does not emerge from the centrality of the general capabilities or the cross curriculum priorities, or from considered understandings about effective teaching and learning, or from an acknowledgement of the incredible diversity of the present and future interests, motivations and needs of students.

Furthermore, it is clearly a curriculum that focuses on 'the what' with little articulation, apart from the need for young people to be able to survive in a globalised future, of the details of the 'why' or the range of the 'how'. By constructing the curriculum as a definable product that is demarcated, sequential and prescriptive, or, 'all that's necessary' for every student to know, there is little room for understanding curriculum as process. That is, it leaves out those things that enable a curriculum to be a working, living document that problematises content, that fosters questioning, and encourages dissonance as a pathway to learning for all students, that is something that

can be manipulated, shaped, and made accessible for all students. Knowledge is positioned as a given, rather than as problematic, or treated as a cultural construct that requires higher order applications and emotional engagement.

## ***2. The challenge of the pedagogy of speed***

While teachers are recognized for their capacity to ensure student engagement and connection regardless of the nature of the content, if pedagogy is sidelined as is suggested in the Shape Papers ('schools and teachers will determine pedagogical ... considerations'), then the bigger messages beyond the content to be learned reinforce the view that content is more important than how students learn, the experiences they have whilst learning and why they need to learn. The statement that is prefixed to each study that 'teachers will teach ...' encapsulates this position because it highlights the subtle disconnect inherent in this curriculum about curriculum content and its connection to authentic pedagogies. It suggests that it is more important that teachers teach – whatever that might mean and what it might look like in practice – than how students learn. The main problem with such an approach is that it ignores the inextricable interconnection in curriculum between content and method as well as implications for the status of teachers' pedagogical expertise.

Kincheloe (1989) has said that 'subject matter is method and method is subject matter' (p. 28). If his observation is true, then detailed lists of content to get through is likely to encourage the use of what I call 'pedagogies of speed' – to get through the content – rather than pedagogies of depth, or to 'waste time' in problematising that content. If teachers are to teach – and that concept is not interrogated or articulated or theorised – then the kind of curriculum experienced by students is likely to be determined by the extent to which content items can be 'covered'. In such a scenario, issues around inclusion and exclusion of some students in the learning process, are real concerns. In this instance, we are reminded of Boomer's (1982) metaphorical words that 'teachers should not drive students in a tourist bus through a school curriculum' (p. 119) – but such an approach appears to be a real option for teachers.

As I have described it, this pedagogy of speed will have serious implications. There is likely to be a reduction in 'the discretionary space for teachers' (Eisner, 1992, p. 313) and teachers will be obliged to introduce 'more and more regimented and uninspiring forms of instruction' (Hursh, quoted in Smyth et al., 2009, p. 22). In the words of Grundy (1987), it seems that the curriculum as articulated 'by-passes or downplays the pedagogical skills of teachers' (p. 33). Furthermore, Giroux (2010) has also famously argued, that teachers are now considered as technicians, rather than intellectuals or professionals whose key role is now to 'implement predetermined ... standardised content', able to interpret, manipulate and adjust curriculum so that it may be tailored to the complexities of the classroom. With the onus on covering multiple layers of content, exploring what could be described as 'the pedagogical air holes' or the opportunities for creative and lateral pedagogical moves that challenge and 'trouble' accepted concepts and content, will be a substantial challenge for all teachers.

## ***3. The challenge of the 'absent' student***

In a thin curriculum, students tend to be constructed as objects and are generally referred to as a largely homogenous group with an assumed commonality of aspirations and needs and ‘are likely to become more acted upon than acting’ (Boomer, 1982, p. viii). In the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010), young people’s futures are framed around the need to provide ‘the skills, behaviours and attitudes that students need to succeed in life and work’ (p. 7) and yet, while there are references to ‘the needs of young people’ and ‘diversity’ in the Shape Papers (2009, 2010) and in the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010), these are framed as a series of generalities which do not include in any real detail of the social, cultural, economic and geographic contexts that students inhabit. Through omission, it seems that young people are deemed asides to the curriculum and its implementation. As such, by implication they are constructed as passive objects in the learning process and are not likely to be engaged in having input into what is learned and where there is an assumption that ‘one set of experiences is good for all students’ (Brady & Kennedy, 2003, p. 71). Here Greene’s (1975) work on ‘the problem of curriculum’ notes that the student is rarely considered to be ‘an existing person, mainly making sense of his [or her] life-world’ (p. 299) and such a claim could be made in regards to this curriculum.

Alternatively, the need for ‘expanding spheres of free spaces for decision-making on the part of students’ (Wood, 1998, p. 191) seems to have little resonance in this curriculum. Instead, *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (2009) ‘makes clear to teachers what is to be taught across the years of schooling [and] ... makes clear to students what they should learn’ (p. 9) so that the idea of ‘free spaces’ does not resonate or, as Shor (1992) argues, there is limited opportunity for ‘generative themes’ or content that emerges from students’ interests and concerns because ‘all too often students are confronted with mandated programs that pay scant attention to local contexts and tend to eschew the facts and skills over critical reasoning’ (Smyth et al., 2009, p. 32). Furthermore, as Reid (2005) claims,

Once curriculum is organised around fixed bodies of predetermined knowledge and broken down into pieces to be transmitted to students in a linear way, then the freedom for students to involve themselves in an interactive learning process is severely restricted (p. 49).

Ball (1993) summarises this dilemma in reference to the UK national curriculum context where there is ‘a trenchant opposition to any recognition of the child as active within the learning process’ (p. 207). He goes on to say:

... the links between pedagogy and knowledge, experience and understanding are severed and replaced by authoritative texts and authoritative teaching ... the student has to learn but is separate from them (2005, p. 205).

It appears that the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) is making the same mistakes.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) has emerged from a policy context, dominated by imperatives around productivity and global contexts or ‘neo-liberal policy frames’. I argue that the curriculum that has emerged from this pragmatic context may be described as an example of a thin curriculum. The overt

characteristics of a thin curriculum include: a direct equation of curriculum = product; a curriculum that is defined and demarcated by extensive and prescribed content decided by others and to be covered by all teachers; a curriculum that holds few spaces for negotiation or content arising from localised contexts and cultures, thereby limiting what is pedagogically possible or probable in the classroom. Together with the absence of a considered and detailed articulation of curriculum theory or a range of defensible values to frame the curriculum content and to provide teachers with a theoretical basis about the ways in which the nature of teaching and learning history in Australian schools has been understood, the *Australian Curriculum: History* (2010) in the compulsory secondary years allows little scope for pedagogical creativity and experimentation or deeper learning. Instead, the detailed lists of content to be covered, not only limit meaningful opportunities for exploring different constructions of curriculum, but also shut off interrogations of the meaning of historical knowledge and knowledge making. This curriculum, along with others that have been developed at the same time, denies the central place of pedagogy in the construction of curriculum and in influencing what is possible. As such it is a thin curriculum.

Ultimately, the narrow understandings about curriculum create a number of challenges. A thin curriculum overwhelms with content and thus provides little space for investigating meaning and transforming content into something that resonates on a deeper or even, more importantly, on a local scale for students and their lives. Furthermore, the curriculum is likely to encourage teachers to resort to pedagogies of speed that limit opportunities for pedagogical experimentation and creativity. There is little space for students or teachers to decide and to construct knowledge emerging from and relevant to their local contexts, communities and sub-cultures.

While superficially it is a curriculum that offers 'choice' as well as 'guidance', the reader is left in no doubt that this is a curriculum designed to be academically oriented, content focused and easily assessable on a national (and international?) scale. Thus, the characteristics of a thin curriculum with an emphasis on the what and when are all evident, but more to the point is that the school knowledge that is imagined from external sources, and expected to be consumed by all, favours certain classes and serves to reproduce existing social relations. Essentially, it is a curriculum that is defined, pre-packaged and ultimately controlling the work of teachers and students, and as a result, ensures that powerful hierarchies are legitimised and maintained. It seems, then, that such a thin curriculum is intended to create conformity: for teachers to teach the prescribed content, to be positioned as the technical implementers of the curriculum rather than its originators, for students to be sidelined and for their needs and aspirations to be decided by others, remote from their experience.

The irony is that teaching the layers of content, and students learning that content, ultimately jeopardises the kinds of skills and dispositions, such as innovation, problem posing, critique, decision-making and risk taking that are often deemed necessary for young people in the globalised future of the twenty first century.

What emerges from this discussion however, is the need for teachers to reclaim their professional autonomy and expertise and create important spaces for negotiation and experimentation in their classrooms. Only then are we likely to re-imagine a thick curriculum grounded in more fluid understandings of what a curriculum is and the centrality of teachers and students in the process of curriculum decision-making.

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