

**National Curriculum Collaboration in Australia: An Analysis of
the National Debate**

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Preface

The inspiration to write this paper arose from a desire to learn more about the debate to establish a national framework for ensuring what students are taught. It is apparent that this debate attracted much attention in news reports during the federal election campaign of 2007, but assessments of the amplitude of this debate have not been undertaken. This paper represents an attempt to evaluate the substance of the national debate that has ensued in the political, educational and public arenas.

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Biographical note

Michael Watt taught in several secondary schools in Tasmania, and worked as an education officer in the Tasmania Department of Education. He holds masters' degrees in educational studies and education from the University of Tasmania, and a doctorate in education from the University of Canberra. He currently works as an education consultant.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to review five initiatives in national curriculum collaboration, which have emerged since the move to national consistency arose in 2003, and to examine reports on these initiatives published by the news media and the education profession. Searches on web sites of education organisations, an electronic magazine, and the Australian Education Index were conducted to identify documents, news reports and educational literature referring to the five initiatives. Content analysis method was applied to summarise and categorise the documents. The results showed that policy making during this phase of national curriculum collaboration has shifted from establishing national consistency to introducing standards-based education, and reports published by the news media and the education profession have increased since this shift occurred. The conclusion indicated that, whilst a national debate has emerged on this issue, only a small proportion of policy makers and leaders within the education community has been engaged in contributing to this debate.

National Curriculum Collaboration in Australia: An Analysis of the National Debate

The consensus Australian policy makers reached to establish a national framework for ensuring what students are taught attracted commentaries from education writers and experts in the USA. Manzo (2007), an associate editor with Editorial Projects in Education, the publisher of the weekly newspaper, *Education Week*, and the monthly journal, *Teacher Magazine*, reported on the debate in Australia over national academic standards in an article published in March 2007. By researching policy documents and interviewing education officials, Manzo contrasted politicians' attitudes about national academic standards, examined projects to establish consistency in the curriculum, and prognosticated on the likely outcome of the debate. Although it was reported that progress has been made on standardising curriculum and assessment, the article concluded it would take a particular set of political forces to develop a national framework through a collaborative process. Following a visit in May 2007 to meet Australian policy makers and education officials, Finn (2007), president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, reported that politicians of the Liberal-National coalition government and the Labor opposition supported development of national academic standards, curriculum and tests. In spite of progress being made in reaching this consensus, Finn conjectured that Australian policy makers and educators remained a considerable distance from achieving agreement on what should be taught and who should decide it. He found the partiality of education authorities to withhold information on school performance incompatible with effective teaching of the curriculum in schools, and a continuing debate over outcomes-based education out of date in terms of the current challenges facing Australian education. Finn concluded that a board of experts and state-level representatives entrusted with responsibility for national academic standards, curriculum and tests could easily become dominated by the post-modern tendencies of fashionable academics. Such a centralised process could lead to the education establishment, whose handiwork caused the problems standards-based reform is intended to solve, being handed this task.

Curriculum reform in Australia has not attracted much attention from experts in American education, possibly because the ascendancy gained until recently by outcomes-based education, marginalised in the USA in the early 1990s, is seen to reflect an outdated philosophic position on education. The greater attention that American experts and commentators in education seem to be giving to the advent of standards-based reform in Australian education may substantiate this view. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the national debate, which has emerged among policy makers and education leaders over this issue, justifies such consideration. In this study, five initiatives in national curriculum collaboration and reports on these initiatives, published by the news media and the education profession, are analysed to determine whether the advent of standards-based reform has affected coverage in news reports and educational literature.

Methodology

The first step in this study involved searching the web sites of education organisations involved in policy making to identify five key initiatives on national curriculum collaboration. Content analysis method was applied to summarise the contents of relevant documents on these web sites. The second step consisted of two stages for reporting public and professional responses to each initiative. *Curriculum Leadership Journal*, an electronic magazine published weekly by the Curriculum Corporation, was searched to identify reports on each initiative publicised by the news media. Content analysis method was applied to summarise the contents of reports by the news media on each initiative. The search of the Australian Education Index identified 29 articles published in journals referring to the five initiatives. Content analysis method was applied to summarise the content of each article, and to categorise the main theme of the article. Reporting results involved preparing a statement on the main activities undertaken as part of each initiative, and summarising public and professional responses contained in news reports and journal articles on each initiative. The draft summary for each initiative was organised chronologically, and incorporated into the commentary.

Key Initiatives

Antecedent Conditions

The origins of the agreement politicians reached during the federal election campaign in 2007 to develop a national framework for ensuring what students are taught can be traced back to 2003. Concerns raised by representatives of subject associations and other education organisations prompted Dr Brendan Nelson, the Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, to write to state and territory ministers expressing concern about the variations between education systems in their structures, curricula and certification practices. In June 2003, Minister Nelson released a statement calling for the states and territories to establish greater national consistency between education systems by 2010.

Policy makers and education officials have sought to establish greater national consistency in the curriculum through five initiatives, detailed below, and legislation. Passed by the Australian Parliament in December 2004, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement through Choice and Opportunity) Act, came into effect through regulations signed in August 2005. The Schools Assistance Act introduced new requirements reflecting the Australian Government's national priorities for education in 11 areas. The requirements to achieve greater national consistency involved implementing a common school starting age across Australia by 2010, and introducing a national assessment program in English, mathematics, science literacy, civics and citizenship, and information and communication technologies.

National Consistency in the School Curriculum

In July 2002, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) commissioned the Curriculum Corporation to survey the states and territories on their provision of curriculum. Produced by the Curriculum Corporation (2003), the report of this study found that the structure, bands and organisation of most curriculum documents were related to the national statements and profiles. However, they varied considerably in the extent, to which the content students should learn was specified, since they incorporated cross-curricular and essential organising principles, which were conceptualised in different ways. After considering this report in July 2003, MCEETYA agreed to develop statements of learning for English, mathematics, science, and civics and citizenship, and in May 2005, added information and communications technologies, which had been included in legislative requirements by the Australian Government.

In 2004, MCEETYA directed the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) to develop the Statements of Learning for English as a pilot project. The development of the statements of learning was undertaken by a project team overseen by a steering committee of officials from state and territory education agencies. Endorsed by MCEETYA in February 2005, the Statements of Learning for English were revised by AESOC in August 2005, approved by the ministers out-of-session and published by the Curriculum Corporation (2005). The Statements of Learning for Mathematics, Science, Civics and Citizenship, and Information and Communication Technologies were developed during 2005, approved by MCEETYA in August 2006, and published (Curriculum Corporation, 2006a; Curriculum Corporation, 2006b; Curriculum Corporation, 2006c; Curriculum Corporation, 2006d). The Statements of Learning setting out statements of learning and professional elaborations, which build on the statements of learning by providing more details, organise knowledge, understanding, skills and capacities by strands. State and territory education agencies and independent systems are required to implement the statements of learning in their next cycle of curriculum review, at latest by January 2008.

National Consistency in the Senior Secondary Curriculum

In 2005, the Australian Government commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to investigate options for a single Australian Certificate of Education. In its report, the Australian Council for Educational Research (2006) recommended that a national standards body should identify essential content and develop achievement standards in core subjects, and award an Australian Certificate of Education. In June 2006, the Australian Government commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to examine the common content, essential content and standards of achievement in English, mathematics, physics, chemistry and Australian history in curriculum documents used across Australia at the senior secondary level. Curriculum documents were analysed to identify their rationales, domains of learning, curriculum content, assessment requirements, moderation procedures, and expected achievement standards. A group of experts rated the importance of topics, and identified other topics they considered important, but missing in the curriculum documents.

In the report, the Australian Council for Educational Research (2007) found that the degree of consistency varied from subject to subject, almost all essential content was represented in each curriculum document, and there was a high degree of consistency in assessing students' achievements. Consistency in content ranged from 85 to 95 percent in physics and chemistry, 90 percent in high-level mathematics, but only moderate degrees of consistency were found in English and Australian history. The experts judged that almost all topics in physics, chemistry, mathematics, and English were essential, but no topics in Australian history were essential. Although a high degree of consistency in assessing students' achievements was found in chemistry and physics, greater variance was found in mathematics, Australian history and English. From this study, it was recommended that core content for each subject should be identified, and a set of national academic standards should be developed for the core content in each subject. When releasing the report at an address to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia in Brisbane in February 2007, the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop called for the states and territories to support establishment of nationally consistent senior secondary curricula and a common year 12 certificate.

Australian History

At an address to the National Press Club in January 2006, Prime Minister John Howard called for renewal of the teaching of Australian history in schools as a structured narrative to replace a fragmented stew of themes and issues. In August 2006, Minister Bishop convened the Australian History Summit to seek advice on ways the Australian Government could strengthen the place and maintain the integrity of Australian history in the curriculum, and establish a narrative in the teaching of Australian history in schools. Two discussion papers were prepared for the summit. Taylor and Clark (2006) analysed state and territory curriculum documents identifying inconsistencies in approaches for teaching Australian history. Melleuish (2006) presented an academic's viewpoint about the subject matter that should be taught to students in years 3 and 10. At the summit, 23 public figures, academics, historians and history teachers participated in three sessions before releasing a communique stating that the study of Australian history should be planned sequentially through primary and secondary schooling, and form a subject in years 9 and 10.

Following the summit, Minister Bishop commissioned a study to develop a model curriculum framework in Australian history for years 3 to 10 based on the key issues identified by panels at the summit. The Australian History Curriculum Reference Group, consisting of four historians appointed in June 2007, used the model curriculum framework to develop a guide for teaching Australian history as a subject in years 9 and 10. In the guide, the Australian History Curriculum Reference Group (n.d.) set out the skills students should acquire, a program of study founded in a series of topics and milestones based on a chronological approach, and a range of historical perspectives to provide a context for the topics. At the release of the guide in October 2007 at Moorebank High School in Sydney, Prime Minister Howard announced that the Australian Government would require schools to teach a minimum of 150 hours of Australian history as a stand-alone subject in years 9 and 10. This

requirement would be mandated in the next four-year funding agreement with the states and territories to commence in January 2009.

National Standards

The Australian History Summit opened a wider debate about who should set curriculum, what role the federal government should play in funding curriculum development, and what involvement the public should have in determining what is taught in classrooms. At the opening address to the conference of the History Teachers' Association of Australia held at Notre Dame University in Fremantle in October 2006, Minister Bishop proposed that the approach used to develop a model curriculum for Australian history could be applied to develop a common model curriculum. She argued such an approach would marginalise ideologues in bureaucracies of state education agencies, who had hijacked the school curriculum to experiment with the education of young people from a comfortable position of unaccountability. Instead, a national board of studies, consisting of representatives from the states and territories, would use the best examples of state-level curricula to develop a model curriculum in other core subjects.

At its twenty-first meeting in Darwin in April 2007, MCEETYA agreed to work with the Catholic and independent sectors to set core content and achievement standards in English, mathematics and science at the end of schooling and at junctures during schooling. These standards would form the basis for the National Assessment Program.

The Australian Government's budget for the 2007-2008 financial year announced in May 2007 proposed creating a Higher Education Endowment Fund and funding a Realising Our Potential package to improve education offered in universities and schools. The Realising Our Potential package proposed funding a two-year project to set national standards for English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and Australian history in years 11 and 12, and national standards for English, Australian history, mathematics and science in year 10. Australian Government funding from January 2009 onwards would be tied to the states and territories adopting the national standards, reporting school and student performance against national benchmarks, and including external assessments for year 12 certification.

In January 2007, federal opposition leader Kevin Rudd released a New Directions paper (Australian Labor Party, 2007a), which launched Labor's 'Education Revolution'. In February, the Australian Labor Party (2007b) released a detailed policy paper, a sequel to the New Directions paper, which proposed forming a national curriculum board charged with setting national standards for English, history, mathematics and science by 2010. Late in January 2008, Prime Minister Rudd and the Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, appointed Professor Barry McGaw, director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute in the University of Melbourne, to chair the National Curriculum Board. Early in February 2008, Minister Gillard appointed Tony Mackay, director of the Centre for Strategic Education based in Melbourne, as deputy chair, and invited state and territory ministers, the National Catholic Education Commission and the Independent Schools

Council of Australia to nominate representatives for the National Curriculum Board.

National Curriculum Work

In 2002, the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training commissioned a project to explore whether the notion of national curriculum collaboration is still relevant, and if so, how it might be advanced in a more educationally productive way. In the report on the project, Reid (2005) proposed a capabilities-based curriculum for Australia based on and consistent with six procedural principles. First, a rationale, purpose and philosophical reference points should be articulated. Second, a view of the curriculum should be theorised and articulated. Third, a strong research and conceptual base should be incorporated. Fourth, the education community should be engaged in the conceptual phase. Fifth, the process should seek to build a constituency of support. Sixth, the political realities of the federal system of government should be recognised. Reid argued that the official curriculum should be organised from a reference point against which various models will be assessed on the extent to which they enable teaching for capabilities using the procedural principles. This approach constructs the official curriculum as a guiding resource, providing support for inquiry-based practice rather than presenting content. Development of a capabilities-based approach could be an extension of the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century, although capabilities play a different role. There would be two key phases of an on-going discussion and debate in the education community. The first would focus on the nature of capabilities. The second would be a professional discussion about how to work through the content described in state and territory curricula. Initially, the Australian Government would promote the first phase, whilst the second phase would occur in schools before the discussion is widened in each jurisdiction and across the states and territories. Reid proposed that a set of capabilities could be common across Australia, and would become a focus of teaching and learning in each state and territory. At the same time, the states and territories would retain existing content-based curricula organised in a manner agreed within each jurisdiction. Teachers would teach through the content in order to develop the capabilities.

Reid's work in defining a capabilities-based curriculum influenced subsequent activities initiated by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association to examine approaches to national curriculum work. In February and August of 2006, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association convened a forum and a symposium to debate a range of issues relating to national approaches for curriculum reform. The work of the forum identified the nature of national approaches to curriculum reform, examined current initiatives at the national level, and proposed a direction forward. The work of the symposium updated developments in initiatives at the national level, explored the nature of national approaches to curriculum reform, identified key issues for state, territory and national education agencies, and suggested strategies to promote productive discussion. In response to the symposium, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (2006) produced a guide setting out a purpose for national curriculum work and five criteria to measure its application. National

curriculum work must establish clear moral purpose and a rationale, promote a view of the curriculum consistent with the rationale, follow a principled process, ensure adequate resources and funding, and demonstrate impact and outcomes.

Late in 2006, representatives of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association met Minister Bishop's advisers and Stephen Smith, the Shadow Minister for Education and Training, to brief them on its work and future plans. In February 2007, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association convened the Curriculum Standing Committee of National Education Professional Associations, consisting of representatives from 14 professional associations, to develop a schedule for continuing this work. At a second meeting held in May 2007, the committee considered two discussion papers to inform development of a statement on a school curriculum for the twenty-first century. Cole (2007a) examined the scope and sequence of content for such a curriculum. Wilson (2007a) argued that a curriculum based on academic disciplines is the only feasible option both educationally and politically. A draft statement on a school curriculum for the twenty-first century was presented to participants in a panel session at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association biennial conference held in July 2007. The draft was revised as a consequence of feedback, and published as a working paper by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (2007). The working paper states that the school curriculum must take account of Australia's position in the world, provide flexible curriculum frameworks based on a rationale, present disciplinary and interdisciplinary content attuned to stages of students' learning agreed through a consultative process, and be supported by effective capacity building in schools.

Public and Professional Responses

National Consistency in the School Curriculum

The news media gave little, if any, attention to national consistency in the school curriculum. This initiative, however, has been examined in three articles published by members of the project team and an article published by two union officials. Holt, Ludwig, Moore and Randall (2004) and Ludwig (2005) traced the purpose of national consistency, to reach agreement between the states and territories on essential content for the curriculum, back to increasing divergence between state and territory curricula. The statements of learning, which outline knowledge, skills, understanding and capacities common to the states and territories, are to be incorporated into curriculum documents as part of revision procedures. Leigh-Lancaster, Meiklejohn, Jones, Kerr, and Holt (2006) reported on the process to develop statements of learning, concluding that the project team consulted extensively in revising drafts to set challenging knowledge, skills, understanding and capacities. Graham and Martin (2006) argued that the policies of the Australian Government, the process of compromise operating in MCEETYA and the opinions of conservative critics advocating national consistency may diminish the quality of the school curriculum. Instead national debate on curriculum reform should build on existing practices and take account of the needs of teachers, students and parents.

National Consistency in the Senior Secondary Curriculum

Minister Bishop's speech to the National Press Club on the issue of academic standards in schools followed soon after the release of the report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2007). Minister Bishop's speech and the report's release were reported extensively in the press in articles, which contrasted the Minister's support for a national curriculum and state politicians' concerns that national consistency could lower academic standards.

National consistency in the senior secondary curriculum has been examined in three articles published by the reports' authors and an article published by another educator. In analysing the findings of the study reported by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2006), Masters (2006a) concluded that national subject panels should select essential content and develop common achievement standards in core subjects, and national assessments in key capabilities should be administered in year 12. In discussing the findings of the same study, Masters (2006b) found divergences in minimum requirements for awarding certificates, the level of detail in curriculum documents, and approaches to assessing and reporting student achievement, concluding that an Australian Certificate of Education should balance national consistency with local needs. In discussing the findings of the report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2007), Matters (2007) identified seven principles providing a basis for curriculum development for the twenty-first century, and outlined preferences for integrating content across disciplines for the senior secondary curriculum. Skilbeck (2007) contended that the proposal for a national curriculum in the core subjects at the senior secondary level is unlikely to address educational needs. The teaching profession should become more involved in the national debate to ensure that the diversity of student needs, and regional, local and cultural differences are reflected in curriculum documents.

Australian History

Prime Minister Howard's address and the Australian History Summit unleashed extensive commentary in the news media focussing on three key issues. Some articles held that the selection of participants for the Australian History Summit was biased in favour of producing a model Australian history curriculum, which would present a politically influenced official version. Some reports stated that a structured, narrative approach to Australian history would produce a collection of facts, which ignored the development of skills and historical analysis. Other articles held that an Australian history curriculum imposed by the Australian Government across the nation's varying school systems could prove impractical and unpopular, thereby failing to institutionalise the teaching of Australian history in schools.

The controversy over Prime Minister Howard's address initiated by the news media led three academics and educators to publish their own interpretations. Parsons (2006) argued that Prime Minister Howard's policy was intended to

ensure his place in history by writing it to his own advantage. Ashton and Hamilton (2007) concluded that Prime Minister Howard's address conjured up a nostalgic view of Australian history to play to a constituency that has little understanding of history. This constituency wants history to confirm a vision of how Australian society came to be the way it is and how it should be in the future. Curthoys (2007) analysed Prime Minister Howard's policy on history education finding it views history in national terms, valuing military intervention, sport and European foundations of the nation by emphasising achievements rather than difficulties. This policy shows little interest in social history, women's history, environmental history or Aboriginal history.

Three educators with both traditional and progressive viewpoints opposed the Australian Government's policy on Australian history. Donnelly (2006) argued that the Australian History Summit failed to detail essential knowledge, understanding and skills all students should be taught, because bureaucrats, academics and representatives of subject associations were given the task of developing a new curriculum. Alexander (2007) contended that students, given opportunities to negotiate the selection of content in Australian history, will be better motivated and empowered to study the subject matter. Burvill-Shaw (2007a; 2007b) argued that history cannot simply be taught as a series of events, dates and people, but must provide an understanding of a complex process, ultimately leading to the development of critical thinking and analysis.

National Standards

Minister Bishop's speech to the History Teachers' Association of Australia initiated extensive commentary in the news media in October 2006. Articles published in the press contrasted the proposal for a national board of studies to set a national curriculum with opposition to it from state politicians. At the same time, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation hosted a debate between education experts on the advantages and disadvantages of a national curriculum. Following release of the Australian Labor Party's policy for setting a national curriculum, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation hosted a debate between Minister Bishop and Shadow Minister Smith about this issue on national television in February 2007. The agreement reached by MCEETYA to develop nationally consistent curricula was also reported extensively by the news media in April 2007. In an address to the Centre for Independent Studies in May 2007, Prime Minister Howard supported a discipline-based curriculum and higher academic standards in schools. The appointment of Professor Barry McGaw to chair the National Curriculum Board was also reported extensively by the news media.

The debate initiated by the news media led three educators to put forward their interpretations on the efficacy of a national curriculum. Blair (2007) argued that the contest between federal and state politicians over control of the curriculum is no longer a valid approach for national curriculum collaboration. Instead, professional associations need to contribute proposals for a national debate on curriculum reform. Farrelly (2007) criticised reasons put forward by politicians for introducing a national curriculum. A national curriculum may not provide a significant saving, it may lower rather than raise academic standards, and it may offer greater opportunities for ideologues to

wreak havoc. Farrelly argued that curriculum should be developed in an open market, and school vouchers introduced giving parents choice, thereby promoting innovation in curriculum reform based on competition. Wilson (2007b) argued that a proposed national curriculum must resolve the wrangle between the education profession, which supports a radically reformed curriculum, and politicians, reporters and the public, who favour a traditional curriculum. The education profession will need to take responsibility for settling this debate by taking account of the views of other groups.

Two educators with progressive or traditional viewpoints proposed different goals for a national curriculum. Cole (2007b) argued that the process of determining consistency across curricula is unlikely to contribute to promoting a curriculum, which will equip students for the twenty-first century. Such a curriculum should develop broad general knowledge, support interdisciplinary study, and enable students to appreciate the distinct contributions of academic disciplines. Donnelly (2007) argued that a national curriculum should be written in plain English, recognise the importance of academic disciplines, relate to year levels, be benchmarked internationally, and ensure teachers are given guidance on what is taught and expected outcomes.

Four representatives argued in the main for subject associations to play an active part in developing a national curriculum within their respective disciplines. Daicopoulos (2006) believed national subject associations should set a national curriculum, because the federal and state governments have failed to reach agreements on the curriculum. The Australian Institute of Physics, the Australian Institute of Biology, and the Royal Australian Chemical Institute are well placed to set a national curriculum in the sciences. Ewbank (2007) argued that an independent body representing a range of interest groups should set a curriculum of essential knowledge and skills for history. Hayes (2007a) stated that English teachers should pursue seven strategies to contribute to a national curriculum. They should publicise their record on professional collaboration, and embed considerations for English in discussions on a national curriculum. They should insist that a national curriculum should reflect individual potential as well as nation building, extrapolate a rationale for English, and underpin the rationale with a concept of literacy. They should encourage frank and open debate about curriculum reform in the education profession. Hayes (2007b) contrasted the conservative attack and declining literacy standards with the endeavours of English teachers to work through subject associations in the current debate. Hayes argued that English teachers should become involved in developing a national curriculum through their national subject association. Morony (2007) argued that identifying consistency between state-level curricula is unlikely to produce a rigorous and forward-looking curriculum in mathematics. There needs to be a vigorous debate on curriculum, and a long-term approach to curriculum development building on the work of mathematics' teachers.

National Curriculum Work

The news media gave little, if any, attention to national curriculum work promoted by the education profession. This initiative, however, has been examined in four articles published by a leading proponent, who outlined a

philosophic position for this approach. Reid (2006a; 2007a) argued that approaches to national curriculum collaboration have failed to develop a rigorous rationale, lacked a well-developed theoretical base, and failed to articulate a view of curriculum change. Curriculum development should be based on a clearly articulated rationale, a theorised view of the curriculum, a strong research base, and a process for engaging the education profession and building a constituency of support. Reid (2006b) contended that the reasons put forward for promoting national consistency in the curriculum were inadequate. Instead, national curriculum collaboration should take account of new contexts of educational decision making, such as complexity and ambiguity, the mix of old and new, multiple dimensions, diversity of population, and managing proximity not distance in defining a rationale. A national conversation focusing on nation re-building in a global world should guide identification of capabilities to be developed through the content of state-level curricula. Reid (2007b) proposed that a national curriculum should be based on a set of capabilities common across Australia. Teachers would teach the content in state-level curricula to develop the capabilities.

Discussion

This review showed that policy making during the recent phase of national curriculum collaboration has shifted from establishing national consistency in curricula to introducing standards-based education. This shift in policy making can be demonstrated by examining the activities involved in the first four initiatives. The focus on establishing national consistency dominated the development of the statements of learning and the investigation into common content in the senior secondary curriculum, the main activities in national curriculum collaboration from 2003 to 2006. The Australian History Summit of August 2006 represented a departure from these earlier activities in that its work prompted Minister Bishop to propose in October 2006 that an independent decision making body should set a common model curriculum. The Australian Labor Party's policy statement of February 2007 and the Australian Government's Realising Our Potential package of May 2007 represented a further shift in this direction by proposing that an independent decision making body should set national content standards.

The extent to which national curriculum work, an initiative sponsored by the education profession, is likely to influence policy makers seems unclear. The origins of this initiative can be traced back to Reid's proposal for a capabilities-based curriculum. Although the organisation Reid proposed for implementing a capabilities-based curriculum is compatible with existing arrangements for aligning state-level curricula to a national framework, the emphasis on theoretical considerations in this model means that practical solutions for curriculum planning need to be articulated in greater detail. Similarly, attention in national curriculum work on producing a guide setting out a purpose for national curriculum work and developing a statement on a school curriculum for the twenty-first century has focused on theoretical considerations. The place of this initiative in national curriculum collaboration is likely to remain precarious until sufficient attention is given to producing practical solutions relevant to the other initiatives.

The survey of news reports on these initiatives indicated that the news media showed little interest in national curriculum collaboration before Prime Minister Howard's address in January 2006 to the National Press Club calling for a renewal of the teaching of Australian history in schools. The initiatives undertaken to establish consistency in the curriculum drew virtually no attention from the news media between 2003 and 2006. The small number of references published by the education profession on national consistency in the curriculum presented accounts of these projects, which agreed ostensibly with the views of policy makers and education officials. The increased interest shown by the news media in the Australian History Summit created public controversy about the selection of participants, the appropriateness of a narrative approach for teaching history, and the practicality of implementing this approach in schools. This controversy was fuelled by Minister Bishop's address in October 2006 to the History Teachers' Association of Australia calling for a national board of studies to set a common model curriculum. The education profession matched the increased interest shown by the news media in these issues. A range of educators published articles critical of Prime Minister Howard's address and the Australian History Summit. The high level of interest shown by the news media continued throughout the federal election campaign of 2007, following the release of the Australian Labor Party's policy statement on setting national content standards. Furthermore, the education profession increased the number of publications referring to this proposal. Educators published articles on the efficacy of the proposal, intended goals, and groups, which they considered, should be involved in the decision making process. Although the proposal for a capabilities-based curriculum attracted comments from a few educators, promotion of this concept in educational literature remained the prerogative of its main proponent.

Conclusion

This study showed that the debate about establishing a national framework for ensuring what students are taught arose from Minister Bishop's pronouncement following the Australian History Summit. The federal election campaign of 2007, which brought forth a key policy statement on this issue from the Australian Labor Party, aroused further interest from the news media and highlighted particular aspects, which created a debate within some groups in the education profession. The focus of this debate on the question of a national curriculum, however, obscured the realities of policy making, and policy makers' engagement with stakeholders. Although policy making is shifting towards standards-based education, its basis is still grounded in the findings of work conducted in several disparate initiatives. Whilst education leaders have been engaged by policy makers in debating the implications of this issue, most teachers have not yet been involved in contributing to this debate. The limited dimension of this debate indicates that policy makers and education leaders need to involve a broader range of stakeholders in conceptualising national content standards. Success in devising a sound decision making process for setting rigorous national standards is likely to be a key factor in engaging education writers and experts from other countries to contribute further commentaries on this issue.

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