



Introduction – National curriculum: international perspectives

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How common, worldwide, is a National Curriculum? How many countries, and which ones, have installed a formal, officially endorsed national curriculum? What constitutes such curricula? What are their purposes? How best to understand them? These are some of the questions we asked at the recent 6th World Curriculum Conference, held in Melbourne, Australia, late in 2018. A triennial event under the auspices of the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (IAACS), the conference was co-hosted by the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA). The following papers are based on presentations within a plenary Featured Panel, under this title. The Panel was conceived as an opportunity to address something that had seemingly become a fact of educational life in Australia, although only quite recently: Australia's first national curriculum (aka 'The Australian Curriculum'). The question was: How is this macro-formalisation of school curriculum to be seen at this particular point in time, specifically from the perspective of transnational curriculum inquiry? – and moreover, from the point of view of *curriculum* scholarship, as a distinctive field of inquiry? The opportunity to draw in international perspectives on national curriculum as a *question* – to be sharply distinguished from more parochial concerns with 'best practice' and the like – was simply irresistible. I am delighted, therefore, to bring this particular *Point & Counterpoint* to your attention.

There are a number of preliminary points to make, briefly, by way of an introduction.

National curriculum has been a feature of curriculum and schooling in many countries for quite some time now, linked to matters of national identity and security, and also national culture and language. This has meant, in some instances, what might be called a *de facto* or default national curriculum, even

when nothing has been formally agreed. Australia is an illustrative case here. Constitutionally, school education in Australia has been the responsibility of the States and Territories. As a result, education bureaucracies have developed separate curricula across the country, each one centrally administered and examined. Nonetheless it is fair to say that these were often very similar, in intention, structure and effect – understandably so, given Australian imperial history. Might the same be observed of other countries, in similar circumstances? Is there, for instance, a recognisable Canadian curriculum, albeit a *de facto* one? In 2011, as a federal government policy imperative, we saw the official establishment of *The Australian Curriculum* – the first time such an agreement had been reached in this country. There had been various moves in this direction, dating back to the 1980s, as various commentators have observed. Hence this latest development can be viewed, on the one hand, as the culmination of a historical unifying impulse, although on the other hand, it can be seen as representing something new: a new phase in nation-level educational policy, and hence in Commonwealth-State relations.

Recently there has been, worldwide, a stronger push to develop a formal national curriculum, as in Australia. "Over time many countries have adopted more or less elaborate national curricula" (Biesta and Priestley 2013, p. 230) – albeit with various degrees of flexibility and framing. A National Curriculum has been in operation in Britain since 1988, and this is arguably a major reference-point, although it has itself undergone a number of revisions over time. Other countries seem to have found it something to emulate. In the UK itself, Scotland quickly developed its own National Curriculum (Education Scotland, 2004), differing in various ways from that pertaining to England and Wales. New Zealand moved along the same pathway from 2007. Brazil is currently working through its version. And so on. How is this pattern of global curriculum reform to be understood and evaluated? Clearly it is both appropriate and timely to think again about the project of national curriculum, now from an explicitly international ('transnational') perspective.

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A central thesis of the recent internationalisation project in curriculum inquiry has been the re-assertion of the nation as a key reference-point. This comes at a time when a new emphasis on globalisation has, among other things, seemingly weakened the claims of nations to sovereign status in world affairs. Pinar has argued, however, that nation remains a significant touchstone, especially if one seeks to understand curriculum and schooling historically, and has noted “the primacy of the nation in curriculum reform” (Pinar 2010, p. 2). As he writes: “Understanding the national distinctiveness of curriculum studies enables us to underscore how national history and culture influence our own research” (Pinar 2010, p. 14). This seems especially so in the case of recent (global) curriculum, with one trend towards an increasing focus on ‘essential learnings’ or general capacities and another reaffirming and returning to high-status ‘knowledge’ as a central organising principle.

The question remains however: Is a nationally-inflected curriculum the same as a national curriculum? Is the enshrining in legislation of the national curriculum in countries such as England and Australia the same phenomenon as observed in other countries across the world? Europe is interesting in this regard. As Sivesind et al. (2012, p. 321) note, “[i]n the Scandinavian context, national curriculum guidelines have been the norm for more than a century [and] curriculum most often associates with a national guideline about what to teach within and across school subjects for a particular stage”. The situation is rather different in Germany and Switzerland, however, where “curriculum making is a state and/or cantonal responsibility, involving professional institutions and councils in creating formal curricula which guide administrations and schools [...]”. For the Netherlands, in contrast: “curriculum is traditionally a local construction, whereby examinations function as the regulative tool for national government without a national curriculum framework [...]” (pp. 321–2). The USA doesn’t have formal provision for national curriculum, not yet at least, although it might be said that the recent move towards ‘Common Core State Standards’ presages a push in this direction (Savage and O’Connor 2015). Apropos the USA, it is worth recalling here Michael Apple’s assertion, well over two decades ago now, that “we already have a national curriculum, but this is determined by the complicated nexus of state textbook adoption policies and the market in test publishing” (Apple 1993, p. 2).

What about Asia, and perhaps more specifically (as it has been described) Greater China? As an Australian curriculum scholar, with long-time experience of the Southeast Asian educational context, has observed: “[T]here is no concept in the region of ‘national’ curriculum because this would suggest that there are other forms of curriculum that might not be oriented towards national needs. The relationship between these needs and the shape and of the curriculum is a taken

for granted assumption in countries across the region” (Kennedy 2018). Nevertheless, as he continues, “no matter which country you examine, the curriculum is highly centralized and government controlled. This would suit Western (meaning, Australian and UK) definitions of ‘national’ even though the term is not part of any curriculum discourse in the region”. Is it a matter, then, of strong educational states being in a position to more or less assume that their systemic curricula bears a marked nationalistic imprint?

The following papers range across New Zealand, England, Brazil, Norway, as well as Australia, picking up various of these questions and issues and reporting on their own national curriculum developments. While the Panel at the Melbourne conference included a presentation from China, by Yuzhen Xu (Capital Normal University), she was unable to contribute to this Point & Counterpoint symposium – a pity, since there is much of interest in the Chinese curriculum field, which is clearly burgeoning. (It needs to be said, too, that we were particularly pleased that the Melbourne conference attracted a considerable number of curriculum scholars from the Asian region, especially from Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as China.) I firmly believe that the symposium that follows will be of much interest, in opening up national curriculum debate in Australia and beyond.

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