



Australia's national(ist) history curriculum: history education as a site of attempted de-democratisation

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Abstract

This paper explores the contested content of the Australian history curriculum to understand the curriculum's national(ist?) purpose and investigate if national histories can be taught in a way which combats the anti-democratic forces at play in our culture. This question will be explored through analysis of the three topics in the *Australian Curriculum: History 7–10*, which have a strong focus on Australian history specifically, and semi-structured interviews with secondary teachers on pedagogies for history and instilling democratic dispositions in students (UniSQ ETH2023-0315). Since Prime Minister John Howard's call for reform of the curriculum to ensure that the national narrative "is one of heroic achievement" (Howard, 2006), the conservative right's desire to have the curriculum deliver a singular, nationalist narrative has become increasingly more extreme. We risk an "acute crisis of democracy" (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021, p. 1) as our students are taught a singular narrative that silences First Nations peoples and other cultural minorities. The best defence against this nascent de-democratisation of Australian history classrooms is found in the vital work of history teachers as curriculum workers. If teachers adhere to the curriculum directives focused on historical thinking skills, our students must consider "different perspectives" and use a "range of sources" (ACARA, 2023a) to make evidence-based decisions about our past. The teaching of critical thinking and the use of varied evidence which considers a range of perspectives and assesses their reliability serves as a bulwark against the monocultural assault which seeks to control the content of the curriculum. If we ensure our next generation of citizens have the skills to make informed and critical choices rather than be blind adherents to a nationalist monomyth, our pluralistic liberal democracy will not only survive but thrive.

Keywords History pedagogy · History curriculum · Democracy · Education · Australian curriculum

Liberal democracies are by definition based upon principles of pluralism and tolerance. In granting individuals freedom of belief, freedom of speech, and other civil liberties, there is also the expectation that individuals respect (or at least tolerate) the rights of others to hold differing views. The goal of democracy is not to achieve unanimous conformity, but rather to achieve a workable compromise through civil debate and free and fair elections of representative governments. Within this system, political parties aim to woo voters by offering them a vision of the nation under their leadership which aligns with the voters' beliefs and values, offering a construction of national identity which resonates.

Yet because liberal democracies are not one-party states, even the majority party must compromise and work with opposition politicians to satisfy the electorate at large, lest they lose the next election. This means that the national identity of liberal democracies is constantly being constructed and contested, as to create a singular identity from pluralistic community made up of different cultural backgrounds, faiths, and value systems is an impossible task, yet one that is also vital to the maintenance of liberal democratic society. By negotiating what it is to be 'Australian' (or 'British' or 'American') through political and social change, nations establish the shared characteristics that are valued, while also tolerating the diversity that shapes this construction. These values are reaffirmed and protected through legislation and the establishment and maintenance of social norms (such as violence being unacceptable, and harm to others being a criminal offence).

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National curricula, and particularly the teaching of a nation's history, have long been battlegrounds for all sides of politics in establishing national narratives and identities. In telling a nation's story, the history curriculum also works to shape the next generation of the nations' citizens. In most liberal democracies, this agenda of citizen-making is explicit and often linked to the students' ability to both understand the history of, and make a meaningful future contribution to, the democratic society of which they are a part. The goal of democratic education is to foster an understanding of the pluralist nature of democracy, and to develop the toleration of differing views that enables civil debate. As the political and social climate has been increasingly impacted by both the rise of the far-right and global watersheds like the COVID-19 pandemic, the norms of liberal democracy have been challenged in new ways.

The most obvious assault on democracy played out in storming of the Capitol in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2020, by supporters of Donald Trump seeking to overturn a democratic election result. Efforts to influence education have also intensified. In Florida, Governor Ron De Santis has introduced the *Stop the Wrongs to our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E) Act* and the *Parental Rights in Education Act (2022)* (colloquially, the 'Don't Say Gay' laws) which limit discussions of racism, gender diversity, and sexuality in schools and allow parents and other interested groups to more direct action to oppose materials they disagree with (Reilly, 2022). De Santis has also suggested that schools should teach that slavery had "benefits" for enslaved peoples (Planas, 2023). These efforts to challenge democratic norms directly and through the subversion of the education system to serve partisan agendas highlight how quickly the values of liberal democracies can be eroded.

Yet democratic norms have also been challenged in less dramatic ways and by groups other than far-right conservatives. The COVID-19 pandemic saw power shift from elected officials to health sector bureaucrats, whose lockdowns curtailed democratic norms such as freedom of movement and impinged upon bodily autonomy through vaccine mandates. In Australia, the harshest lockdowns were imposed by the left-leaning Victorian Labor government (Windholz, 2020). Australia's provision of a secular public education has faced challenges from various faith groups who wish to exclude particular groups or topics (such as LGBTQIA+ students) since the 1970s (Barnes et al., 2022). As in the United States, these efforts have found renewed energy in the last decade (Read, 2022). The sudden empowerment of unelected decision-makers and the persistent efforts to intrude upon what is taught in schools to the detriment of specific social groups both show the pressures liberal democracies are constantly under and why the active promotion and maintenance of democratic norms

is an ongoing project rather than an end point that can be achieved.

All sides of politics use education as an ideological battleground, with Australian Labor leaders focusing on constructing a multicultural narrative centred on our relationship with Asia and reconciliation with First Nations peoples that still builds a sense of shared national unity (Bedford et al., 2023), a narrative that is difficult to substantiate with the Voice to Parliament referendum failing to achieve constitutional recognition and the establishment of an Indigenous advisory organisation. Neither the left's 'happy melting pot' history nor the right's 'glorious national progress' narrative are accurate when interrogated through rigorous historical inquiry, however, the efforts of far-right conservatism to reshape society in their own (white Christian nationalist 'patriot') image pose a particular threat to the core tenets of liberal democracy. As Giroux argues, the effect of this conflation of patriotism and citizenship is the creation of "a discourse of national unity and moral fundamentalism that drains from public life its post dynamic political and democratic possibilities" (2005, p. 4), counter to Australia's self-identification as a culturally diverse liberal democracy.

Australia's vision for its young people and their education is articulated in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* (2019), a joint statement issued by the federal and state education ministers. Its aims that through their education, young Australians:

- appreciate and respect Australia's rich social, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and embrace opportunities to communicate and share knowledge and experiences.
- have an understanding of Australia's system of government, its histories, religions and culture.
- are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations.
- understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. (p. 6)

Here, the mandate for education to promote "national values of democracy" is made explicit, as is Australia's construction as a multicultural and inclusive nation, with "rich social, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity". Importantly, history is pluralised to "histories", including that of Australia's First Nations' peoples, reflecting the contemporary disciplinary understanding that history is not a singular narrative but the varied experiences of and responses to a shared event. Finally, the expectation that this knowledge

equips students to “participate in Australia’s civic life” ties students’ historical understandings directly to their role as active citizens in our liberal democracy.

Drerup echoes these ideas in their definition of “democratic education” as

the initiation into basic values, norms and practices that are conducive for the intergenerational reproduction of liberal democracies. Central aims of democratic education are, among others, personal and political autonomy as the capacity and willingness to critically question one’s inherited convictions and perspectives as well as the capacity to participate in public discussions in an informed and reasonable way. (2021, p. 253)

The question of *how* teachers (as the curriculum workers who interpret policy through pedagogy), go about this work of developing autonomous, critical and informed young citizens, and how they perceive their role in fostering these “democratic dispositions” (Bedford, 2023), is the focus of this paper. As Australian history education researchers Parkes and Donelley argue,

historical thinking skills are vital for democratic citizenship; the ability to discuss and listen to differing perspectives; consider a range of opinions and values; and come to reasonable conclusions; and they operate as a path to the development of a sophisticated historical consciousness, which the well-informed can use as a tool to navigate, understand, and interpret the social world. (2014, p. 129)

Savenijie and Goldberg highlight that it is history teachers, in their teaching of historical thinking skills which Parkes and Donnelly describe, and “motivated by a desire to promote critical citizenship” (2019, p. 47) who must foster the next generation of citizens within our democracy. Thus, the study of how history educators specifically contribute to the promotion and maintenance of liberal democratic norms through the consideration of “different perspectives” and use of a “range of sources” (ACARA, 2023a), when anti-democratic sentiment is increasingly visible, is timely and pressing.

Methodology

The research drawn upon in this paper are the initial findings of a study (UniSQ ETH2023-0315) which aims to address the following questions:

RQ1. How do *material* factors (school setting and demographics, resources, professional culture and external contexts such as personal background and beliefs) influence how history curricula are enacted in Australian secondary schools?

RQ2: How are history curriculum documents *interpreted* and translated into pedagogical practices and teaching resources in Australian secondary schools?

RQ3: What are the dominant *discourses* of secondary history education in Australia and to what extent do they address the formation of democratic dispositions?

The questions are framed by Stephen Ball et al.’s theory of policy enactment, which considers the material, interpretative and discursive elements of policy (2011, p. 15). Foucault’s conception of discourse as the rules of “what can and can’t be said” (McHoul & Grace, 1995) within a discipline area further inform the project. The project participants are Australian secondary history teachers (as ‘interpreters’ of curriculum) and both state and federal curriculum authority staff (as the authors or designers of curriculum).

Ball et al.’s (2011) discussion of teachers who translate or interpret the curriculum through their pedagogical practice is helpful in clarifying the nexus between the curriculum as written and the curriculum as experienced by students. It is a process of both “invention and compliance” (Ball et al., 2011, p. 47), and in this act of ‘curriculum translation’, teachers “play a key role in the interpretation and meaning making and are themselves key sites in the discursive articulation of policy” (p. 51). If the role of teachers in curriculum enactment is understood as that of “curriculum workers”, it “elevates teachers from being simply the implementers of curriculum to being creators and designers matched to the needs of the individual students in their classes” (Kennedy, 2022, p. 67). This recognition of teachers as the nexus for curriculum enactment underpins both the research design and the argument that it is through teacher’s pedagogy that the aims of the curriculum can be realised (or subverted).

This analysis focuses RQs 2 and 3 particularly, drawing on data from the first phase of the project, which involved 1 curriculum authority staff member and 10 secondary history teachers and in the state of Queensland from both state and private schools across metropolitan, regional and rural locations. Data was collected through a mix of face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews. This study is now being expanded to other Australian states and territories. Curriculum documents were also subject to thematic discourse analysis to address RQ3. Themes which emerged in the initial analysis of both the curriculum and the interview responses focused on the strong emphasis on Australian history and the construction of a largely positive national narrative, the ongoing challenges of teaching First Nations histories, and the relationship between the historical skills

of the curriculum and the skills needed as a citizen in a liberal democracy.

The Australian curriculum: a brief history

To better understand the discourses present in the most recent version of the Australian Curriculum, a brief charting of the discursive landscape from which it has emerged is helpful. While much has been written about the national curriculum's inception and the History Wars of the early 2000s (Bedford, 2023; Bedford et al., 2023; Clark, 2010; McIntyre and Clark, 2003), less attention has been given to more recent changes. As *Version 9* was developed, the conservative Liberal National coalition (LNP) had been in power for almost a decade, and took up the national curriculum's key architect, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's call to ensure that the national narrative within the curriculum "is one of heroic achievement" (Howard, 2006). The lead author of the first draft of the *Australian Curriculum: History* in the mid-2000s, Professor Tony Taylor, rejected the final version, suggesting "was too close to a nationalist view of Australia's past" (Topsfield, 2008). Taylor characterised Howard's intervention in the curriculum as an attempt "to gain ownership of Australian history in schools and create their own neoconservative master narrative" (2009, p. 317). After an election defeat in 2007, the Liberal National coalition returned to power in 2013, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013) immediately undertook a review of the curriculum, citing concerns around "lack of references to our heritage other than an indigenous heritage, too great a focus on issues which are the predominant concern of one side of politics." The two-man review panel consisted of Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire, both active advocates for conservative values (Taylor, 2014). Donnelly called for the curriculum to place greater emphasis on the "Judeo-Christian heritage" of Australia, which was strongly supported by Christian Schools Australia (Greene, 2014). In the most recent review undertaken to produce *Version 9*, LNP members placed a strong emphasis on ensuring a particular narrative was constructed. These calls reflected the centrality of service in foreign wars in the construction of the Australian national identity (Kerby et al., 2021). Federal Education Minister at the time, Alan Tudge argued that ANZAC Day, a commemoration of Australian military service, should be "presented as the most sacred of all days in Australia" (in Hurst, 2021). Acting Education Minister Stuart Robert requested the Chair of ACARA ensure "that key aspects of Australian History, namely 1750–1914 and Australia's post-World War II migrant history, are appropriately prioritised and can be taught within the time available" (Roberts, 2022). Despite these visible and vocal political machinations to strengthen nationalist discourses through

the focus on Australia's military conflicts in the 20th century, the content of the curriculum is also reflective of efforts to foreground discourses of social inclusivity and diversity in the opportunities for students to engage with other cultures and identities.

Is it a national or nationalist curriculum?

Version 9 of *the Australian Curriculum: History 7–10* has been decluttered after longstanding concerns about the amount of content to be covered in each year level. The new curriculum has reduced the number of compulsory topics from three per year to two, which also better aligns with the way in which many schools timetable the subject, giving one semester (two terms) to History and another to Geography each year. The structure of the new curriculum is summarised in Table 1.

Despite the claim that "History takes a world history approach within which the history of Australia is taught" (ACARA, 2023a) the curriculum is national in its focus, with five out of the eight compulsory sub-strands either being explicitly centred on Australian history or framed through the lens of Australian experience (the World Wars). The Rationale for the History 7–10 curriculum argues that "the application of history is an essential characteristic of any society or community and contributes to its sense of shared identity" (ACARA, 2023b). The role of curriculum as a nation-building tool is well-established and not unique to Australia: "public education, as an extension of the state, contributes to the shaping of national identity and fostering patriotism, and thus state-sponsored history education can play a central role in nation building" (Kawamura, 2023, p. 149). The 'nation' is the construction of a shared imaginary, where identity is inherently shaped by a sense of what is 'us', in contrast to what is 'not us'. This intangible sense of national selfhood is constantly in flux, expanding and contracting to include or exclude particular groups over time (Bedford et al., 2023), and is currently in a phase of contraction as far right conservatives seek to exclude others as 'un-Australian', constructing a narrow definition of national identity.

Briefly, Australia has followed British and North American influences in the development of a national curriculum and history pedagogy. Until the 1970s, both British (and Australian) history classrooms "typically reflected what is often characterised as the 'great tradition' of history teaching, with its distinctively Anglocentric, nationalistic and conservative emphasis" (Foster, 2023, p. 127). Secondary school curricula responded to the broader shifts in disciplinary history that saw a new focus on "history from below" (Feldman and Lawrence, 2011, p. 3), focusing on the experiences of non-dominant cultural groups, such as First

Table 1 A summary of compulsory and optional topics in the Australian curriculum V9 history 7–10

Year level	Sub-strand 1 (Compulsory)	Sub strand 2 (Compulsory)		Optional Sub-strands
7	Deep Time history of Australia	The ancient world: select ONE: Greece Rome Egypt India China		
8	Medieval Europe and the early modern world Select ONE: Medieval Europe The Renaissance The emergence of the modern world	Select ONE Empires and expansion: Mongol Empire Ottoman Empire Vikings The Spanish conquest of the Americas	Asia-Pacific Angkor/Khmer Empire Japan under the Shoguns Polynesian expansion across the Pacific	The Industrial Revolution and the movement of peoples Asia and the World
9	Making and transforming the Australian Nation	First World War		
10	Second World War	Building Modern Australia		The globalising world

Nations peoples, migrants and women. This began in the 1970s with the introduction of the Schools History Project in Britain, which emphasised the disciplinary skills of history and using historical sources rather than memorisation of a grand monocultural narrative (Bedford, 2023). This shift was mirrored by changes in Canada, with Peter Seixas' Historical Thinking Project working in tandem with social shifts that placed greater emphasis on Canada's settler colonial and First Nations histories to reform history education in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Bedford, 2023). These influences circulated in Australia for almost 30 years (Dallimore & Condie, 2022) before the creation of the Australian Curriculum in the late 2000s, which bought to the fore the tensions between those who sought to maintain a singular 'national identity' into which the increasingly diverse community should assimilate or an approach which both recognises and celebrates this diversity as contributing to the development of the modern nation through the development of historical thinking and skills. The analysis of the curriculum focuses specifically on the sub strands 'Deep Time history of Australia', 'Making and transforming the Australian Nation' and 'Building Modern Australia' (ACARA, 2023a), the most overtly 'Australian' of the curriculum topics. Each sub strand consists of Knowledge and Understanding content descriptors, which outline core content to be covered. These are supported by elaborations, which are not compulsory but designed to help teachers identify how the larger content descriptor may be addressed. There is also a Historical Skills strand which describes the historical thinking skills expected of students. It is up to each teacher or school as to how much emphasis and time is given to each of the content descriptors. Delving into these curriculum

sub strands through discursive analysis of the elaborations reveals some which perhaps are reflective of the ideological tussle over the curriculum's national imperatives.

First nations agency

The focus on First Nations pre-colonial history in Year 7 'Deep Time Australia' is not a new addition, but a renewal more reflective of contemporary historical, archaeological, and social understandings of First Nations histories (Zarmati, 2022). Yet this unit is still positioned within a linear chronology, imposing the broader western onto-epistemology of time upon First Nations culture, positioning it as 'past' in a way that fails to fully realise First Nations' understandings of time as "contemporary entanglements between ancient knowledge looms, ancestors and land, which connect all existent things within a recurrent experience of time. This notion of time, [is] characterised by the synchronous assembling of continuous experience" (Kelly and Rigney, 2021, p. 393).

Roberts' (2022) demand that there be a focus on the period 1750–1914 is an interesting one, given it covers the period of settler-colonial violence now recognised as the Frontier Wars, which the conservative right often ignore or minimise. Prime Minister John Howard refused to offer an apology to the Stolen Generation on the grounds that one generation should not take responsibility for the actions of a past generation (Davies, 2008), which further perpetuates the idea that harms done to First Nations peoples and cultures are an issue of the past, rather than having ongoing ramifications. In the final version of the curriculum, of the seven content descriptors for the period 1750–1914,

only two explicitly refer to First Nations peoples. The first explores “the causes and effects of European contact and extension of settlement, including their impact on the First Nations Peoples of Australia”. It is important to note that in this descriptor, First Nations peoples are *acted upon*, with no consideration of their agency within the colonial encounter. The second descriptor is: “different experiences and perspectives of colonisers, settlers and First Nations Australians and the impact of these experiences on changes to Australian society’s ideas, beliefs and values” (ACARA, 2023a). Yet as Lowe and Yunkaporta found in their analysis of the first version of the Australian Curriculum in 2013, the presence of Aboriginal history in the curriculum does “not necessarily represent Aboriginal perspectives” (p. 4).

This opaque phraseology echoes one of the most common critiques of First Nations histories is the way in which First Nations agency, resistance and cultural value are minimised in settler-colonial societies (Synot, 2019). This is again reflected in the elaborations in ‘Making and Transforming the Australian Nation’. First Nations peoples are denied agency, nominalised into objects who suffer the effects of “colonisation, such as frontier conflict and massacres of First Nations Australians, the spread of European diseases and the destruction of cultural lifestyles” (ACARA, 2023a). Importantly, it is not only the First Nations peoples who are denied agency or resistance here – the perpetrators of these massacres and destruction go unnamed. This lack of naming is addressed in a subsequent elaboration, which “analys[es] the impact of colonisation *by Europeans* on First Nations Australians such as frontier warfare, massacres, removal from land and relocation to ‘protectorates’, reserves and missions” (ACARA, 2023a, authors’ emphasis). However, First Nations peoples are again denied any agency, as the students explore the “impacts ... on First Nations Australia” rather than their active involvement in and response to these events. This ‘acted upon’ framing is repeated in the elaborations of the content descriptor that considers the different perspective and experience of settlers and First Nations peoples, which “describe[s] the impact of changes brought about by non-Indigenous groups on First Nations peoples”. Despite historians’ recognition of the Frontier Wars as, “one of the few significant wars in Australian history and arguably the single most important one” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 248), the curriculum still frames this conflict as something *done to* First Nations peoples.

The Stolen Generations are covered in the curriculum and do include some consideration of “the experiences of separation” in Year 9, but again, any formal recognition of First Nations resistance to these laws or broader campaigning against the legislation is not made explicit. In Year 10’s ‘Building a Nation’, First Nations civil rights is addressed, first with a focus on the “causes of First Nations

Australians’ campaigns for rights”. First Nations agency is directly acknowledged in “the contributions of significant individuals and groups in the campaign...” yet this is later conflated with the experience of other groups in the content descriptor “the continuing efforts to create change in the civil rights and freedoms in Australia, for First Nations Australians, migrants and women” (ACARA, 2023a). Interview responses and curriculum directives make clear that this conflation is not the intent, as teachers have the freedom to choose how much emphasis is given to content descriptors. However, this requires a degree of both disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise to understand, which is increasingly less likely in the midst of a teacher shortage forcing teachers to teach outside of their discipline expertise, and the declining number of experienced teachers available to mentor new educators.

Overall, while there is much greater inclusion of First Nations experiences and perspectives promoted by the curriculum, it is at the same time perpetuating the idea that colonisation was enacted upon a passive Indigenous population. This is not limited to History, as Kelley and Rigney point out it remains one of the greatest challenges to Australian education today:

In Australian education, Eurocentric perceptions of time influence teachers’ and students’ values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Problems arise when Indigenous ecologies of time inscribed with culture get overridden in classrooms that see time as linear. For example, a teacher’s language becomes problematic when they use past tense to refer to Aboriginal cultures; invoke common myths of Dreaming as historical; and use stereotypes of Aboriginal societies as dated primitive and prehistoric. First Nations children are penalised and receive unwanted abuse when they rebel in class against perceptions that ancient traditional knowledges are of the past, rather than viewed as a knowledge loom device for weaving new fibres of knowing into the modern cultural fabric (2021, p. 393).

Thus, while greater inclusion of First Nations histories is a positive, the framing and language remains problematic (and politicised), so it falls to teachers to navigate this through the content descriptors they choose to focus on and the language choices they make when doing so.

Growth is good

Another key theme that emerges in an analysis of the curriculum elaborations is a celebration of Australia as an agricultural powerhouse. While this is factually true, its framing

is problematic at times. As the last theme highlighted, First Nations resistance to settler-colonial invasion is minimised through a denial of agency. When First Nations agency is acknowledged, it is framed around their contribution to the new nation rather than giving any recognition to their fierce opposition to its establishment: “investigating how First Nations Australians responded to colonisation, including through making important contributions to the various industry that were established on their lands and waters, adopting Christianity and other settler religions” (ACARA, 2023a). Another elaboration foregrounds “Australia’s economic development and prosperity” which stemmed from “wheat, wool, beef, mining, cotton, fishing, pearling and whaling”. Many of these industries exploited First Nations and migrant workers (Lawrence & Jones, 2023), but this is not addressed. Gold mining, and the emerging agricultural and pastoral industry are also addressed in the elaborations on the “key social, cultural, economic and political changes” of the period. Australia’s relatively rapid transition from a carceral outpost to an important agricultural exporter is impressive, but the cost of this transition to First Nations peoples, Pacific Islanders who were black-birded (coerced, misled or kidnapped) to work on cane farms, and other groups who did not willingly join this agricultural revolution is understated. This again works to reinforce a discourse of national progress.

“Australians all let us rejoice”...

The curriculum acknowledges Australia’s political foundation as a white utopia, where three-time PM Alfred Deakin argued “if we exclude all coloured peoples we go a long way towards obtaining a white Australia” (Deakin, 1901). The curriculum recognises “the ‘White Australia’ ideal, nationalist ideals and egalitarianism” that “contributed to Federation and the development of democracy in Australia” (ACARA, 2023a). The egalitarianism of the fathers of Federation only extended to Anglo-European men, reflecting the white nationalist values dominant at the time and well into the 20th century.

This celebratory tone, which downplays the negative experience of minority groups and continues to laud western civilisation, was present in the curriculum feedback that informed the development of *Version 9*.

Students need to understand where western civilisation comes from, the foundations of our democracy, our freedom of speech movement thought and conscience. More aboriginal studies is important however not at the expense of Greek and Roman history. Studies about the early characters which help establish our nation, our constitution, and our growth as a nation

should also be included. (Secondary teacher, South Australia, Government, Regional). (ACARA, 2021, p. 80)

The argument it is more important for young Australians to study Ancient Greece and Rome than the history of their own First Nations peoples exemplifies the Eurocentrism of the ‘national progress’ discourse. In ancient Athens, only free male citizens could vote (approximately 30% of the adult population) (Thorley, 2005) and in Rome, the limited democracy of the republic reverted to imperial rule under the Julio-Claudians and their successors after a spate of unfortunate stabbings. While the study of Greece and Rome as the beginnings of democratic systems of government is relevant in any liberal democracy, the preferencing of this *over* the history of their own nation’s ancient past, as suggested by the ACARA syllabus feedback respondent, would further limit the study of non-European cultures in one of only three units where Australia is not the focus.

Understanding the foundations of democracy and our political system are vitally important, yet it is also important we understand our own political and social complexities, and how other societies and cultures have developed over time, and the limited opportunities for students in Years 7–10 to study nations other than Australia or European nations challenges the curriculum’s claim of a “world history approach” (ACARA, 2023a). This tension between discourses of diversity and inclusion in the broader aims of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* (2019), where students “are informed and responsible global and local members of the community who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences, and engage in the global community, particularly with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific regions” and the history curriculum’s emphasis on Australia’s narrative, with only two sub-strands offering a mix of European and non-European cultures in a 50/50 split, making it possible for teachers to select a European culture in every sub-strand if they wish.

A moral equivalency

The fact that Britain undertook a settler-colonial invasion of lands owned by First Nations people, which resulted in a protracted period of frontier conflict is now well-accepted by historians (MacIntyre & Clark, 2003; Reynolds, 2013; Ryan, 2022). However, the curriculum softens this by “discussing terms in relation to Australian history such as ‘invasion’, ‘colonisation’, and ‘settlement’, and why these continue to be contested within society today”. This ‘discussion’ occurs again in Year 10, where students can explore the “debates over multiculturalism” and “changes in the debate about immigration and border protection”. Given

that Australia's offshore processing of immigrants is considered a human rights violation by the UN Human Rights Committee (Cody and Nawaz, 2017), debating its merits seems disingenuous. This use of language which obfuscates the reality of invasion and frontier warfare has been identified as a consistent issue since the curriculum's inception (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013, p. 11).

While the curriculum states that the attention given to each of the elaborations is up to the school or the teacher, this is not always the case. In its first iteration, several states and territories attempted to adopt the curriculum wholesale, meaning teachers were directed to cover all of the content descriptors. In this messaging, the ability to choose the time given to each descriptor was overwhelmed by the need to cover so many none were done in any depth. In Queensland, there was a brief period where it was thought that all the elaborations should be taught as well. This has resulted in ongoing 'mixed messaging' within various schools and sectors. This legacy of initial implementation and what has become curriculum mythology presents some concerns in reading the Year 10 sub-strand, which has content descriptors on migration, First Nations' civil rights, and women's rights, and these are conflated in the final descriptor: "the continuing efforts to create change in the civil rights and freedoms in Australia, for First Nations Australians, migrants and women" (ACARA, 2023a). While it is not the intent of the curriculum designers to suggest an equivalency between First Nations dispossession and intergenerational harm and the discrimination faced by migrants and women (Participant 2), the legacies of the curriculum implementation may result in this being the case.

As our analysis reveals, the Australian Curriculum Version 9 is a genuinely national curriculum, in that it is centred on Australian history and Australia's place in the global historical narrative. While it has its flaws, this is perhaps inevitable given that the document seeks to respond to a wide range of imperatives, reflected in the heated political debate that accompanies each revision. The final report on feedback on the curriculum acknowledged this, with concerns expressed about the resourcing of First Nations topics to ensure culturally appropriate implementation. The report also recounts calls to "get the balance right" between First Nations content and "western" content, "specifically towards a stronger consideration of Christianity" (ACARA, 2021, p.15). This need to encompass not only the vast span of history in its content but do so in way that attempts to be inclusive of the broad spectrum of beliefs, values and attitudes present in Australia is a Herculean task. The curriculum itself is not nationalist, just very national in focus, but it is being used by some conservative political pundits in service of a nationalist discourse, and thus how it is taught to young Australians is vitally important.

Pedagogies to promote democratic dispositions

It is clear that both the social and political discourse around the teaching of history and the curriculum itself work along a spectrum. At one end is the Anglo-Christian conservatism that promotes a singular national narrative of progress and achievement. This approach however, has little traction amongst history teachers, with one teacher suggesting, "If I'm teaching history to make everyone feel patriotic and happy, well then I'm not actually a history teacher" (Participant 8). At the other end of the spectrum is an effort to explore the histories of a wider range of our nations' citizens, recognising both achievements made, and harms done. This spectrum is also mirrored in the approaches to history teaching, with more conservative views promoting a 'knowledge-rich' approach which centres on the development of a grand national narrative, or a 'historical thinking' approach, which centres on inquiry, consideration of a range of different perspectives and the use of historical sources to support argument. This pedagogical tension has been resolved to a degree in the embedding of Seixas' historical thinking concepts in the *Australian Curriculum* since its inception, and in the explicit statement that "History is a disciplined process of inquiry into the past...[which] develops transferable skills such as the ability to ask relevant questions, critically analyse and interpret sources, consider context, explain different perspectives, develop and substantiate interpretations with evidence, and communicate effectively" (ACARA, 2023b). This is reinforced in the Historical Skills strand of the curriculum, and in the Achievement Standards that make clear that students must actively participate in the historical inquiry process. It is also reflected in the views of various curriculum authority staff, with one member pointing out that in developing historical skills, "we are equipping students, with no matter what they do in life, that we want them to be well-informed, active members of society" (Participant 2).

The relationship between historical thinking and the skills of effective democratic citizens is a vital one, particularly within a society saturated with fake news and online echo chambers which amplify misinformation. Ensuring students can not only locate a range of perspectives, but evaluate their reliability is a curriculum expectation (ACARA, 2023a). This does mean that students will encounter perspectives which differ from their own, and views which are antithetical to the social values of a liberal democracy (such as anti-Semitic, racist and other exclusionary ideologies). This is the risk that accompanies opening topics to wider discussion, which can be "a double-edged sword in terms of promoting a democratic, inclusive climate, at times leading to the opposite effect" (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019, p. 58). However, to engage with a range of perspectives does not

suggest that all perspectives are equally valid. As we have argued elsewhere (Bedford and Barnes, 2024, *in press*), by considering the veracity of the evidence presented to support various claims, students can learn to identify misinformation more readily, and so challenge and question views which violate school or social values.

One strategy for doing this is lateral reading. As Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew found in their study of historians, history students and fact-checkers, traditional “vertical reading” strategies can no longer be relied upon to determine the veracity of online source material (2019, p. 1). The fact-checkers were best placed to make determinations about a site’s veracity as they read laterally: that is, they navigated away from the website they were asked to assess, instead opening new tabs to research the author or organisation, their funding, political leaning and other relevant contextual information that allowed them to make a more accurate assessment (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). These skills aren’t only useful in assessing historical sources found online, but all online material. Wineburg and McGrew close with the example of how lateral reading might be used specifically to make decisions before voting on a range of social reforms (2019, p. 33). This view of the benefits of critical literacies promoted by skills like lateral reading is reinforced by a teacher of more than 30 years’ experience, who argues, “you’re not going to get those analytical, creative, critical, active and informed citizens if they don’t know how to determine fact from fiction” (Participant 8). While this may seem simplistic, the participant’s comments speak to the syllabus requirement for analysis and evaluation of sources, where students are expected to evaluate the reliability and usefulness of the evidence they locate. Thus, determining fact from fiction is not an uninformed personal preference, but rather a demonstration of the complex skills students will need as members of a pluralistic democracy, where they will have to consider differing perspectives and interpretations to make informed decisions.

The knowledge and skills developed in Australian history classrooms are linked explicitly to the development of thoughtful and effective citizens by history teachers. The early findings of our research into the teaching of history in secondary schools in Queensland suggest most history teachers see their work as explicitly linked to the development of students as citizens. One curriculum authority representative argued for the Humanities by pointing out “when they [students] turn 18, they’re going to be voting, they’re going to be members of our civic society and that is something that, when you think about broadly, and they will shape our nation through that” (Participant 2).

Teaching students to understand their histories and engage with evidence in a critical way has a range of benefits. As Kawamura argues, “This approach [historical

thinking], with an agenda towards accommodating diversity, can potentially offer two critical outcomes: an understanding that many divergent narratives and perspectives may coexist in pluralistic societies, and that citizens will be able to meaningfully and critically engage with the past and one another” (2023, p. 167). This belief is also held by practising secondary teachers, with Participant 4 explaining:

the students who come into it [history] and who can make those critical connections between ‘this is the way that the people were acting in the past’ and ‘this is informing the way that we live now’ and ‘these are all of the connections that we’re making between my own life and the politics of today and what’s happened in the past’, it’s those kids that are going to take it and actually use it. I don’t know. I think my approach in terms of, and this is why I use this approach [teaching historical thinking], in terms of trying to develop student capacity for their own critical thinking and their own reflection, that’s why I do that.

Across the respondents, this theme of developing students’ as critical thinkers was dominant, and frequently linked to how they would be able to use these skills in their adult lives. This would suggest that despite the issues in the curriculum language and design that may point towards a grand national narrative discourse, teachers are using pedagogical approaches which take up the Historical Skills strand’s focus on inquiry and historical thinking to counter monocultural narrative constructions by establishing a discourse of pluralistic critical inquiry. This is clear in the research findings: when asked about the key terms they associate with the teaching of history, the respondents focused on cognitions such as “analyse, evaluate, justify” (Participant 1) and “explaining and analysing and evaluating” (Participant 3). One respondent listed the curriculum’s historical thinking concepts almost verbatim: “evidence, perspectives, interpretations, contestability, continuity and change, cause and effect and significance” (Participant 2). Another stated that “I tend to focus on the skills and the concepts” (Participant 4). Overwhelmingly, it seems that teachers are largely unaffected by the political rhetoric or the specific language of the curriculum and are instead focused on ensuring students are developing the historical thinking skills that will serve them well in both their studies and their adult lives.

The interview responses suggest that history teachers position themselves within a discourse of democratic education, which Drerup argues allows student to

acquire and cultivate a variety of epistemic, communicative and political attitudes, skills and virtues as well as associated bodies of knowledge on which

democratic societies depend. These include, for example: knowledge about and interest in political issues, critical thinking skills, motivation for political engagement as well as acceptance of basic democratic values and principles (equality, tolerance, pluralism, etc.) and the ability to deal with conflict in a civil and peaceful way. (2021, p. 256)

Thus, while the *Australian Curriculum* establishes a largely national discourse in its Knowledge and Understanding content descriptors, interview responses suggest teachers are more engaged with the Historical Skills strand, which emphasises historical thinking. The responses also show that teachers see these skills as fundamental to the student's later successful engagement in our pluralistic, multicultural society, and so could be framed as a discourse for democratic dispositions.

Concluding thoughts: what is a citizen?

Taken together, the views of history teachers and curriculum authority staff and the inquiry-centred focus of the skills strand in the curriculum reveal a belief that teaching young people critical thinking skills, in the context of learning about their nation's past, fosters the development of effective citizens within liberal democracies like Australia. This framing of citizenship as a critical act is of particular importance in the current political climate, in which being a good citizen is synonymous with being a loyal patriot in far-right discourses.

Thus, we might move towards a definition of what it is to be a citizen that is more nuanced. Citizenship certainly does involve a degree of patriotism; in that we all want our nation to be prosperous and safe. But this doesn't mean a blind allegiance. In the context of history education, this involves teaching both our nation's successes and the wrongs that have been perpetuated under our flag – these are the “differing perspectives” that are so foundational to history as discipline. A vibrant democracy is one in which differing views can be heard, and the decision of the majority respected. Again, history education fosters the democratic dispositions that allow this sort of effective citizenship by developing in students the critical thinking skills to engage with evidence to make informed decisions (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019) and participate in respectful debate (Bedford, 2020). If understood in this way, the debate about the content of the curriculum and its status as a national document recedes in importance, although the need for greater inclusivity and representation remains. Rather, it is *how* this history is taught that shapes the next generation of citizenry, and so foregrounding the skills that promote democratic

dispositions, which history teachers, as curriculum workers, see as central to their work, is of vital importance to our nation's next chapter.

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