The Place of History in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum *has major implications for teaching and learning history both in junior secondary school social studies and in senior history courses. It requires a shift in orientation for both subject communities. Social studies has generally adopted a presentist stance to judging events of the past and seldom required students to prioritise the methodologies and vocabulary of the discipline, namely, historical context, a respect for evidence, argument and historical significance. In senior history, the typically topic-based model of history programmes has borne little resemblance to the dynamic nature of the parent discipline. It is argued that the way to bridge the different orientations of both subject communities is for historical thinking that reflects the key concepts of the discipline of history to be central to both social studies and history programmes so that students are intellectually equipped to make authentic connections between the past and the present.*

INTRODUCTION

History as a discipline-informed subject does not feature prominently in the secondary school curriculum in New Zealand and young people are generally poorly prepared in their schooling to bring a historical perspective to explaining contemporary issues. The subject is offered only as an elective in the final three years of secondary school (years 11-13) where it is studied by a minority of students. Students do study some history within the integrated subject of social studies where historical concepts are embedded within the conceptual strand of *Continuity and Change* in the curriculum (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2007). Social studies, however, has been criticised for rarely engaging with the salient features of the discipline of history (such as argument, evidence, significance and context) or ensuring students develop a firm grasp of the substantive features of the past (Aitken, 2005; Archer & Openshaw, 1992; Cubitt, 2005; Harrison, 1998; Low-Beer, 1986; Partington, 1998). In particular, the practice of social studies teachers who lack a strong basis in history allowing students to judge past events through uncritical current perspectives results in a concerning 'presentist stance' (Sheehan, 2009).

The implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (*NZC*) (MoE, 2007) has major implications for teaching and learning history both in junior secondary school social studies and in senior history courses. This has been termed a competency-based curriculum because it prioritises five core generic competencies – (i) Thinking; (ii) Using language, symbols and texts; (iii) Managing self; (iv) Relating to others; and (v) Participating and contributing (MoE, 2007, pp. 12-13) – that are common to all learning areas in the curriculum. At the senior level, history teachers have a high degree of autonomy in the *NZC* as there are now no prescribed contexts. The only proviso is that senior secondary school history programmes are required to be of 'significance to New Zealanders'. In addition, while social studies teachers have had the freedom to select contexts/ topics in relation to concept-led achievement objectives since *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum* (*SSiNZC*) was introduced in 1997 (MoE, 1997), history teachers are also now required to take this approach where students are expected to demonstrate competence in expressing their knowledge and conceptual understanding as well as skills to meet the achievement objectives.

This article examines the place of history in the new secondary school curriculum that emphasises the importance of teaching for conceptual understanding and downplays the importance of historical knowledge. It firstly addresses this issue by providing a historical perspective on the antipathy of many history teachers towards social studies that emerged soon after the subject was introduced in the 1950s. This antipathy tells us much about the orientation of these two subject communities and the challenges they currently face (Openshaw & Archer, 1992; Taylor, 2008). The second section examines the implications of the introduction of the new competency-based, non-prescriptive curriculum for the teaching of secondary school history and compares this with recent initiatives in Australia. The *NZC* offers opportunities for history and social studies teachers who have a firm grasp of the disciplinary features of history to structure programmes that reflect the concepts and methodologies of historical thinking and that are socially relevant. However, the issue of staff capacity may be potentially problematic both for history teachers who have been locked into a narrow, topic-based approach to teaching their subject and for social studies teachers who may have little understanding of historical concepts and methodologies (or in some cases historical knowledge) and who tend to adopt a presentist stance. In this context it is argued that if students are to make authentic links between the past and the present, teachers of history need to adopt an explicitly conceptual approach to structuring their programmes that reflects disciplinary features of history.

SENIOR SCHOOL HISTORY

History as a discipline-informed subject can be characterised as highly prescribed and strongly classified in Bernstein's (1971) terms, having relatively closed or impermeable subject knowledge boundaries. It may therefore be termed a 'hard' subject in the secondary school setting with a concomitant high status. The specialised knowledge within the 'contents' of this discipline differentiates history and other 'hard' subjects such as physics and mathematics from more weakly classified subjects with seemingly permeable boundaries such as social studies in which 'the commonsense, everyday community

knowledge of the pupil, his family and peer group' was more likely to be studied than the 'uncommonsense, educational' (p. 58) specialised knowledge in a high status subject.

In this context, history teachers have typically exuded the confidence of teaching a high status subject within the hierarchy of school subjects with its own specialist language and knowledge aimed at academically able students. History teachers have generally exhibited the self-belief that they teach an important, examinable, academically robust, 'hard' subject. This has provided them with a sense of self-efficacy, a belief that they can effect change by their own actions and ensure the future success of themselves and their students (Taylor, 2008). History teachers have identified strongly with their parent discipline that stretches back in its modern form to Von Ranke in the early 19th century (Tosh, 2006). In reality, however, history teaching programmes in New Zealand have rarely reflected the concerns of contemporary historians over the last 25 years (Sheehan, 2009, 2010). Despite a wide range of options in the former history syllabus (Department of Education (DoE), 1989), teachers have typically chosen to focus on a narrow range of topics that prioritised war and politics, while the research interests of historians over the last quarter-decade have focussed on areas that have seldom appeared in school history courses such as cultural, gendered, indigenous and micro histories (Curthoys & Docker, 2006; Tosh 2006). Furthermore, a unique feature of New Zealand senior history programmes over the last 25 years is that students have not generally studied their own country's past in any depth. History thus does not play an explicit role in building or maintaining citizenship education goals such as social cohesion which is a feature of school history programmes in the international arena (Black, 2005). For example, year 13 history students focus on one in-depth study for their final school exit examination (NCEA level 3) with a choice of topics between 19th century New Zealand colonial history or 16th and 17th century England. Approximately 60 per cent of schools prioritise the latter (Sheehan, 2010).

HISTORY WITHIN SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

While public debate over history in secondary schools has tended to focus on the senior curriculum (Belich, 2001), in secondary schools at years 9 and 10 history is integrated into social studies. It is in this subject that all students to some extent engage with the past. Social studies was introduced in New Zealand in the 1950s as the result of a recommendation of the *Thomas Report* (DoE, 1944), adopting a strong citizenship education focus from the outset. Since the 1970s the social studies curriculum has drawn heavily on the works of American Hilda Taba, who promoted the importance of conceptual learning based around *important* or *powerful ideas,* similar to *big ideas* in science. Taba was a developmentalist who, drawing on the works of Bruner, advocated that students were more likely to retain information through understanding and linking concepts than through memorising facts and figures (Taylor, 2008). These ideas formed the basis of the important ideas which shaped the *Social Studies Syllabus Guidelines Forms 1-4* (years 7-10) (DoE, 1977). The *SSiNZC* and *NZC* have therefore validated the more permissive, less prescribed approach that has characterised junior secondary social studies

since the late 1970s. This approach was affirmed by Mary Chamberlain, Senior Manager in the Ministry of Education Curriculum Teaching and Learning Group:

> Our children need to understand that they are learning rather than memorising facts, and they need to think critically and creatively … schools no longer worry about students being able to name all the kings and queens of England or presidents of the United States … instead teachers engage students in learning about society and teach students the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to participate in society as informed, confident and responsible citizens. (Chamberlain, 2004)

The citizenship education focus was strongly articulated in the *Thomas Report* and subsequent syllabi and curriculum documents (Taylor, 2008). The citizenship education goal was reinforced by New Zealand's adoption of three social studies traditions posited by Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) in the USA including citizenship transmission. These goals have been more strongly articulated in social studies than in history and may reflect political imperatives more than the teaching community. There is no doubt that 'every society's school history curricula reflects ideological conceptions and can be open to interpretation as a highly political instrument' (Hunter & Farthing, 2005, p. 15).

The introduction of social studies as a compulsory core, integrated subject in New Zealand met with considerable opposition from teachers of the component subjects, especially history teachers, from the outset. While a small group of teachers embraced the new subject, a large middling group ignored it (Fargher, in Openshaw, 1991) while another group violently opposed this 'interloper' (Openshaw & Archer, 1992). To a large extent this hostility from history teachers continued over the next 60 years (Taylor, 2008). University historians also generally perceived social studies to be detrimental to the discipline-based subject of history. Auckland University historian Russell Stone (1963) wrote:

> [We] see no sense of continuity ... no sequence, or perspective, and little awareness of causal relationships ... We see at its worst the disturbing practice of blithely skipping centuries and continents as problems are pursued. (p. 28)

Since its introduction, social studies has been considered to be a 'ragbag' of vaguely related activities in time and space (Meikle, 1994) and, the low level of prescription and the concomitant 'accent on freedom accorded to teachers, allegedly [the *Thomas Report's*] greatest strength [paradoxically] has proved to be its greatest shortcoming' (Whitehead, 1974, p. 62). Further, the lack of strategies provided to teachers for integration (Evison, 1963; McGee, 1998) resulted in uncertainty. History and geography teachers either took the default position of teaching social studies through the lens of their university discipline or regarded the time in the junior secondary school as preparation for their higher status, more highly prescribed, examinable subjects in the senior years (Taylor, 2008).

The 'turf wars' over the social science subjects in the junior secondary school over the decades impacted on the self-efficacy of social studies teachers in New Zealand (Taylor, 2008). Although the numbers opting for history began to decline in the late 1970s (Stenson, 1990), history teachers have continued to perceive their subject as of high academic status compared with the more lowly social studies. Social studies teachers lacked the same self-efficacy and the adage, 'anyone can teach social studies' (Meikle, 1994, p. 108) became a common refrain. The introduction of social studies in the senior secondary school in 2002 as the result of a new national credentialing system, the *National Certificate of Educational Achievement* (*NCEA*), has altered that view to a limited extent, with a small but enthusiastic group of teachers specialising in the conceptually-based subject and its own distinctive language and identity; although fewer than 20 per cent of schools at the time of writing have taken up this opportunity (Taylor, 2008).

The antipathy of history teachers to social studies has in part been because of their perception that historical content has a low priority in the subject as well as the view by many history teachers that many social studies teachers lack specialised historical knowledge. This has been articulated by Kunowski (2006) in relation to the teaching of The Treaty of Waitangi in years 9 and 10 classrooms. The concern is that social studies teachers who do not have a strong knowledge of the disciplinary features of history will downplay the importance of evidence and debate, and unwittingly perpetuate a presentist stance. It has also been pointed out that there is no clearly defined body of knowledge in social studies, no links to a parent or university discipline nor a consensus over the purpose of the subject other than citizenship education goals (Aitken 2005; Taylor 2005, 2008). Aitken (2005) posited, 'One of the most persistent challenges the subject has faced is that it does not have a commonly agreed distinctive purpose and an associated knowledge base' (p. 85). Consequently, social studies has generated criticism from both liberals and conservatives (Openshaw, 1998). Liberals have criticised social studies for the low priority given to controversial and socially relevant features of New Zealand's past (Harrison, 1998) while conservatives have claimed social studies lacked the disciplinary features and academic rigour of history (Partington, 1998).

Thus, in contrast to history, social studies in New Zealand secondary schools has been perceived as a lowly prescribed, 'soft' subject in Bernstein's (1971) terms. The everyday knowledge included in social studies has contrasted with the specialised knowledge presented in history. Rather than a narrowing focus of a small number of bounded topics, the integrated subject social studies has been unified around themes based on conceptual understandings expressed as achievement objectives since the implementation of *SSiNZC* (MoE, 1997). Teachers and students can select a range of contexts to focus learning on these conceptual understandings with knowledge able to be transferred from one context to another. Higher order thinking skills are encouraged. In the *NZC* (MoE, 2007) the relatively open-ended achievement objectives are intended to allow teachers considerable choice in their selection of context and content. The implementation of senior social studies since 2002 has clarified and reinforced the conceptual approach to the subject (Taylor, 2008) which is now also an expectation in history.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: *THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM*

The *NZC* reflects the ideas and thinking promulgated in the 1990s by the OECD in *The Knowledge-based Economy* (OECD, 1996): that education has an economic value and that 'knowledge' and 'learning' have a pivotal role in building and maintaining economically and socially successful societies. This view emphasises the role of education in developing 'human capital' or 'social capital' which was enthusiastically endorsed by the 1999-2008 Clark Labour government (Wood, 2009), whose 'third way' vision for New Zealand and the 'knowledge economy' was apparent at the 'Knowledge Wave' conference in 2003. This was followed closely by the government setting up a comprehensive curriculum 'stock-take' that became the basis of the curriculum developments in 2004-2006. Gilbert (2005) argued that central to creating a 'knowledge-society' was a school curriculum that fostered 'competencies' such as 'critical thinking' and these views, promulgated by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), were widely endorsed by the MoE and were central to how the curriculum was designed.

The *NZC* reflects the concerns that emerged in the *Curriculum Stocktake Report* (MoE, 2002), that the compartmentalised nature of subjects in the senior curriculum was not conducive to developing core competencies and values in learners that, it was claimed, were pivotal in developing a 'knowledge society'. The priority in the new curriculum has been to encourage teachers to respond to the needs and interests of the increasingly diverse nature of New Zealand students. While social studies and the central ethos of the *NZC* has been a close fit, this has been more challenging for content-rich, compartmentalised subjects such as history in the senior secondary area which has been dominated by high stakes examination prescriptions. The *NZC* places a much greater emphasis on generic competencies and concept-based learning through the achievement objectives than on the acquisition of content knowledge to enable effective citizenship and this has had profound implications for compartmentalised, content-based, senior school subjects such as history. In the case of history, teaching and learning is to be derived from two broad achievement objectives at each senior level; these are expanded in the *History Curriculum Guide* (MoE, 2011) allowing for considerable flexibility and encourage teachers to approach history conceptually and thematically. Within social studies, nine broad conceptually based achievement objectives guide the learning in Years 9 and 10.

THE AUSTRALIAN CASE

A different direction in regards to knowledge in the curriculum has recently been taken by educational policy makers in Australia. From 1991 to 2009, an integrated, conceptually-based subject termed Studies of Society and Environment [SOSE] has been compulsory in junior secondary schools in all Australian states except New South Wales. Some of the conceptual strands which provided structure to the subject were adopted by New Zealand in its 1990s social studies curriculum developments (Ferguson, 2002). In the senior secondary school in Australia a raft of up to 40 social sciences options had been offered, with the consequence that the parent disciplines of SOSE teachers ranged widely from the law to history, sociology and psychology

(D. Williams, personal communication, 4 October 2009). Like New Zealand, criticism of the teaching of SOSE in Australia has included concerns about the low priority of historical content and that many teachers were unqualified to teach this. Unlike New Zealand, however, in Australia there have been heated debates over the version of the national past that should be taught in schools (Macintyre & Clark, 2003). Australian Prime Minister John Howard (1996-2007) tapped into popular demands to teach a celebratory national narrative in schools and in 2007, despite calls by educators and historians for a more flexible and less content-orientated history curriculum, the government launched the *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9-10* (DEST, 2007). It included 79 Australian history milestones that were to be taught and although participating in this initiative was voluntary, there was a substantial amount of Federal funding made available to encourage schools to participate.

When the Labour government led by Kevin Rudd was elected in late 2007 it retained the content-driven, highly prescribed, chronological curriculum of his predecessor but as well as the focus on Australia, looked outwards to include the role of Australia in the histories of Asia, the Pacific and North America (ACARA, 2011). The practical challenges of a curriculum that is so content heavy are as yet to be resolved. Thus, Australia has moved from a 'possibilitarian' to a 'deterministic' (Whitty, 2010) approach to teaching the social sciences, placing an emphasis on academic history as a 'hard', highly prescribed subject without apparently having the numbers of history teachers to support the change or a meaningful debate on the move from a conceptual to a content driven approach, and the consequential impact on teacher capacity (D. Williams, personal communication, 4 October 2009).

CONCLUSION

The introduction of the competency-based *NZC* requires teachers of history (whether in social studies or history) to encourage students to make authentic links between the past and the present by engaging more closely with the disciplinary features of history. Its introduction has not been without debate and it initially generated considerable dissonance in the history teaching community that reflected the unresolved debates of the 1980s. Sheehan (2009) has argued that when the history curriculum was reshaped in the 1980s, liberals welcomed the opportunity to focus on students' needs and address questions that they saw as of contemporary relevance while conservatives sought to maintain the status quo arguing that the highly prescribed, topic-based approach should continue. The history teaching community was not well placed to accommodate the changing nature of history education when the *NZC* was first introduced. In part, this was a consequence of there being few changes to the senior history curriculum for the previous 20 years as the focus for the MoE during this time was on the curriculum for the 'common core' (years 1-10). The most significant challenge the senior history teaching community has faced in the last decade has been to accommodate the history norm-referenced prescriptions into the standards-based assessment system that was introduced in 2002-05. This transition did not lead to any changes to the content of the history curriculum. However the history teaching community has been undergoing a significant shift in thinking since 2005/6. Drawing on a minority of history teachers who have long placed disciplinary thinking and social relevance

at the centre of their programmes there is now an increasing focus on historical thinking (see www.wahta.net; www.nzhta.org.nz; http://ohta.ac.nz) and adoption of the concept-based approach required by the *NZC*.

The social studies community has been better placed to implement the *NZC*, which is really a refinement of the conceptually-based *SSiNZC*. The concept-based approach adopted by social studies has gained greater traction and credibility with the publication of support documents to the *NZC* – the *Building Conceptual Understandings in the Social Sciences* series published by the Ministry of Education (see ssol.tki.org.nz) – but professional development is still needed to encourage teachers to make the most of the possibilities offered by this approach (Milligan & Wood, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Ironically, the more flexible, multi-disciplinary, conceptual approach in social studies more closely reflects the research focus and approaches of contemporary historians and has the potential to encourage young people to make links between the past and present in either subject and bring an historical perspective to understanding contemporary events and issues.

The tension between the status of the integrated conceptually-based subject of junior social studies and senior secondary history (with the latter being perceived as superior) has not served students well over past decades and when examined closely it appears to have been more about maintaining the hierarchy of senior history teachers than about teaching and learning. What has been missing in the historical dimension of social studies programmes is a prioritising of the methodologies and vocabulary of the discipline, namely historical context and a respect for evidence and argument. At the same time, while history programmes have inducted novices into the discipline of history, the narrow topic-based model of history teaching that has been typical of history programmes has borne little resemblance to the dynamic nature of the parent discipline. The way to bridge the different orientations of both subject communities is for historical concepts to be central to engaging students with the past so that students are better able to make connections between pieces of knowledge and ideas in this information rich age, to bring an historical perspective to contemporary events and issues and to be able to transfer their knowledge to other situations.

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