

Chapter 3

School education issues

3.1 The terms of reference require the committee to give some consideration to questions of intellectual diversity and to ideological, political and cultural prejudice manifested in the curriculum and the teaching practices current in secondary schools. A number of submissions argue that academic freedom has little or no relevance in the school context. As one submission pointed out:

To elide the differences between senior secondary education and the university is to misunderstand and misrepresent completely the role of the university in academic inquiry, and the role of the academic in university and public life. University education is undertaken by independent researchers who are free (within the broadest constraints of their topic area) to develop their own areas of enquiry and research agendas. Best teaching practice encourages academics to link their research to their teaching. The research-teaching nexus is a well-documented element of best learning and teaching practice, and is strongly encouraged by universities. This has no parallel in the school system, where curriculum content is a matter for consideration by State and Federal governments.¹

3.2 Schools impart foundational skills and knowledge and while this learning is an intellectual process it is not of the kind that would require the protection afforded by academic freedom protocols. Furthermore, the terms of employment for school teachers are quite different to those that apply to academics. The committee presumes that the inclusion of this topic in the terms of reference is for the purpose of revisiting the 'culture wars' topics that loomed so large in the committee's inquiry into education standards in 2007.

Limitations of this term of reference

3.3 The committee is faced with practical difficulties in addressing this issue.

3.4 First, while the committee has made no thorough investigation of its own of the state and territory curriculum documents, it has received no information that would suggest that curriculum documents, including subject syllabuses or school-based subject or course outlines or teaching guidelines, or any other published or accessible teaching documents are based on culturally or politically prejudiced views of the world. Unlike universities, schools place explicit emphasis on values, including moral values, which characterise a pluralist and democratic society. Current curriculum frameworks adopted in all states and territories appear to place uniform stress on these civic and personal values. They are likely to be strengthened under the proposed national curriculum.

1 Australian Political Studies Association, *Submission 13*, pp 3–4.

3.5 Second, it is impossible for a Senate committee, so far removed from the intimacy of teaching and learning activities in the nation's classrooms, to inquire usefully into classroom practices which are claimed to give rise to political or cultural bias. The classroom is a private place. Even principals and heads of departments find it a sufficiently challenging task to monitor the teaching and learning that goes on there. Ultimately, they rely, as does the whole community, on the professionalism, skills and training of the teacher. There is an important role for governments to ensure the continuing improvement in the professional capacity of teachers, but the micro-management of teachers in their classroom is fortunately beyond the capability of governments.

3.6 Third, those few claims that have been made about the extent of political bias in the classroom, and cultural insensitivity and harassment of students by teachers on the grounds of political bias appear to be isolated instances which may well involve personal grievance or dispute. The committee does not say that these accounts lack credibility, but there is no way that a committee can make an assessment of circumstances that are being complained of. Assuming that they are true they appear serious enough to be the subject of complaint at the school level, as they may reveal an unprofessional attitude taken by the teacher. However, the committee observes that that in none of the cases described have the students complained to their principals. Someone so aggrieved as to write to a parliamentary inquiry to complain about their treatment at school could surely be expected to take the matter up with their school.

Politicisation of school students

3.7 While the committee has received few submissions for this inquiry about 'dangerous' tendencies in the teaching of the formal and informal school curriculum, it recalls the 2007 inquiry into school academic standards. Some familiar themes resonate. This section of the chapter reports on some of the recollections of past students and the current experiences of others.

3.8 For instance, one former student of a Catholic school wrote a submission complaining about the content of history courses being dominated by political themes which he apparently considers to be marginal, describing it as a 'killing of history'.² Another complained about the treatment of industrial relations law in her Gold Coast high school.³

3.9 Other submissions indicate that while students do not expect that teachers will conceal personal views about current political affairs, they objected to gratuitous and derogatory comment on current political figures, and one-sided representation of ideas and events in recent political history. Some claimed they were forced to misrepresent their own views in the course of presenting work which was assessable. As one student, who requested anonymity, submitted:

2 *ibid.*

3 Ms Angela McGuinness, *Submission 44*.

This prejudice in favour of a 'left' political view has been in my mind when deciding what question to answer and or how to answer them. I have changed my opinions for assessment tasks due to the desire to 'appease' the teacher and to gain a better grade.⁴

3.10 The committee is surprised that a student would need to 'toe the line' in a secondary school assignment, but it knows no more than what is described in the submission. One witness, a former teacher who claimed to have observed evidence of bias in the school classroom was asked about its effect on student assessment. His response was more encouraging:

The kids have retained a remarkable degree of freedom of thought behind the scenes. If they are trying to brainwash the kids they are failing monumentally because the kids are having the last laugh. Kids are quite happy to go through the ideological supermarket aisle putting into their basket whatever appeals to them—'I will take something from the left of the aisle and something from the right of the aisle,' and many of them are doing that. The teacher might be politically correct left and hot and bothered about the war in Iraq and global warming and they might take some of that on board, but they may not as well.⁵

3.11 The committee considers this to be a realistic view. It probably sums up the experience of nearly everyone who has attended school. The committee emphasises that no realistic assessment can be made of the significance of such experiences as are described in the light of isolated reports. There is always another side of the story. These isolated instances may be a matter of concern for some, but for over 40 years there have been isolated reports of attempted political influence or 'indoctrination' by school teachers. Such fears are nearly always misplaced. School authorities are generally vigilant about such allegations because parents of school students are likely to complain about it.

3.12 The committee believes that if the incidence of political bias in classrooms was a significant problem this would quickly become evident in more dramatic ways than the receipt of a few submissions by a parliamentary committee. There is no substantial evidence that it exists. Even if it did, students are unlikely to be influenced. Apolitical students, who constitute the great majority in most classrooms, are generally impervious to attempts by teachers to influence them politically, and are more likely than not to treat the whole thing as a joke. Experienced teachers are naturally wary of engaging in classroom discussion where their own views become the focus of a lesson.

3.13 These assumptions and observations would be evident to any properly-trained teacher, and would no doubt be pointed out to inexperienced teachers by their principals on the rare occasions when this was necessary. And according to evidence

4 Name withheld, *Submission 25*.

5 Dr Mark Lopez, *Committee Hansard*, 16 October 2008, p. 5.

provided to the committee by the Australian Secondary Principals' Association such occasions would be very rare. A quick survey of state presidents of the association made recently indicated no recollection of any reports of complaints about bias in recent years.⁶

Teaching controversial issues

3.14 Increased emphasis on politically focussed courses in the school curriculum follows the implementation of the Discovering Democracy program adopted by all states and territories. It was initiated by the Keating Government and continued under the Howard government re-branded as Discovering Democracy. The political awareness and civic literacy components of the curriculum are reinforced in Australian history courses taught in the lower and middle secondary school.

3.15 A great deal of commentary and research on civics education published in the 1990s referred to the political knowledge deficit among teachers as a problem for the implementation of these new courses. Teachers lacked the confidence skills and knowledge to teach about political issues. The problem was recognised by all those associated with the design of the new learning frameworks. The Discovering Democracy page on the DEEWR website, prepared by the Curriculum Corporation, asks the question 'Must Civics and Citizenship Education always be 'problematic'? The answer given is:

Yes, they should be. The staff and students will need to practise a problematising approach in the teaching and the learning of Civics and Citizenship. As a result of the problematic and contested nature of much of Civics and Citizenship, teachers will need to model and manage an open classroom environment. Students will need to learn how to manage difference of opinion, and develop attitudes and skills in regards to difference and contestation.⁷

3.16 The Curriculum Corporation managed the development of Discovering Democracy, but responsibility for implementing the cross-curricula program is a matter for schools and school systems. The final sentence noting students would need to learn how to manage difference of opinion would apply even more so to teachers. There is no evidence that the committee is aware of that professional development courses designed to remedy this deficiency include content on professional and ethical responsibilities of teachers in dealing with public affairs issues in the classroom. This deficiency should be addressed.

6 Mr Peter Martin, *Committee Hansard*, 8 October 2008, p. 82.

7 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, website, *Civics and Citizenship Education*, <http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=9318>, accessed 15 September 2008.

Current policies and structures in schools

3.17 States and systems, and individual schools, have broadly similar policies in regard to teaching controversial subjects and to dealing with complaints about allegedly unprofessional conduct of teachers who step over the line in their treatment of political content. Most schools or systems have policies that cover the conduct of teachers in the broader sense, and in regard to the values they are expected to adhere to. Some will be referred to in this section.

Values policies and codes of conduct

3.18 The New South Wales Department of Education and Training's values policy stipulates that values should guide the learning experiences of students and suggests how this can be done. The policy states that public schools 'provide students with opportunities to explore the values that lie behind diverse community attitudes to political issues and social concerns'. Among the core values listed in the NSW Department's policy are democracy; accepting and promoting the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of citizenship, and being committed to the principles of social justice by opposing prejudice, dishonesty and injustice. Teachers are expected to promote school policies by modelling and reinforcing behaviour consistent with core values.⁸ Teachers are also expected to promote these values in the classroom through their own teaching practices.

3.19 Teachers employed by the New South Wales Department of Education must adhere to a code of conduct code covering such things as the responsibilities and rights of staff, appropriate professional behaviour, non-discriminatory treatment of others, considerations of equity, ethical decision-making and avoidance of psychological harm to students. In particular, there is a requirement for teachers to provide impartial and accurate information and advice, and to ensure that personal beliefs or attitudes do not unduly influence the treatment of students.

3.20 Relevant to this inquiry, and the committee's consideration of submissions from school students, is that the code of conduct stipulates that staff must not engage in unreasonable conduct that could cause psychological harm to a child, young person or student, including targeted and sustained criticism, belittling or teasing, persistent hostility, verbal abuse or rejection and scapegoating.⁹

8 NSW Department of Education and Training website, *Values in NSW Public Schools*, https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_serv/student_welfare/valu_scool/pd_05131_Value_s.pdf, accessed 15 September 2008.

9 NSW Department of Education and Training website, *Code of Conduct*, https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/staff/ethical_behav/conduct/conduct.pdf, accessed 15 September 2008.

3.21 Similarly, the Western Australia Department of Education and Training has a mandatory staff conduct policy that covers all employees of the department, including teachers, but is not specific to them. The policy includes guidelines on ethics, values and advice on bullying. While there appear to be no specific guidelines on the actions of teachers with respect to bias in the classroom, the guidelines to prevent bullying of students may be noted. They state that the following behaviour may be considered bullying, including; abusive, insulting or offensive language by one or more persons to another or others; behaviour or language that frightens, humiliates, belittles or degrades, including criticism that is delivered with much yelling and screaming; and deliberately denying access to information, consultation or resources.¹⁰

3.22 Most schools have their own policies and guidelines which would cover complaints about biased teaching. For instance, at Cairns State High School the student welfare policy outlines the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents and students to promote the physical and mental wellbeing of students. In particular, it states that it is the responsibility of teachers to treat students equally and without favour, to assess students equally and fairly, and respect, uphold and be a role model for school values, expectations and rules, regardless of personal beliefs.¹¹

Accountability frameworks

3.23 States and territory governments have accountability frameworks or similar policies in place that schools and their educators are required to conform to. For instance, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has an accountability framework that sets out the planning, evaluation, reporting and risk management requirements for public schools in that state.

3.24 Under the framework, school strategic plans include key improvement strategies, for instance, in improving teaching practice. The Victorian framework sets out a comprehensive range of accountability measures that schools must strive to meet if they are to ensure that, among other things, there is a distinct absence of bias from teaching activities in their classrooms.¹²

10 WA Department of Education and Training, *Staff Conduct*, http://policies.det.wa.edu.au/Members/e4002033/policy.2006-01-23.4460520915/Staff_Conduct.pdf, p.16, accessed 22 September 2008.

11 Cairns State High School, *Student Welfare Policy*, http://cairnsshs.dev.getweb.net.au/images/stories/about_cairns_high/policies_procedures/student%20welfare%20policy%20for%20parents%20&%20students.pdf, accessed 22 September 2008.

12 Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian Government Schools 2008*, http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/account/operate/SAIF_2008-gdl-v1.00-20071022.pdf, accessed 23 September 2008.

Teacher registration requirements

3.25 All states have legislated to establish teacher registration boards. The boards set minimum standards for teachers. Practicing teachers are required by teacher registration boards in each state and territory to abide by the relevant legislation.

3.26 As the legislation states, the Teachers Registration Board may, on complaint by the Registrar or of its own motion, hold an inquiry to determine whether conduct of a teacher constitutes proper cause for disciplinary action. If, after conducting an inquiry under this section, the Teachers Registration Board is satisfied on the balance of probabilities that there is proper cause for disciplinary action against the teacher, the Board may impose penalties, and may suspend or cancel a teacher's registration.¹³

Culture wars

3.27 A point of similarity can be noted between the evidence given in relation to school curricula and university courses in the humanities and social sciences. Both secondary and higher education are, in the minds of some submitters, arenas in the 'culture wars'.

3.28 The committee heard from the Liberal Students' organisation Make Australia Fair a description of the link between the radical philosophies and teaching practices in vogue in university education faculties and schools of education, and the likely application of those ideas in the classroom. Make Australia Fair tabled a 'dossier' listing academics in education faculties who, it was claimed, share a commitment to radical activism and who view politics and education to be 'different perspectives of the same reality'. They quoted from another submission to this inquiry to describe activist methods of teaching as a:

... radical orthodoxy is composed to an almost slavish adherence to various theories and political commitments associated with neo-Marxism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, the theories of Michel Foucault, post-structuralism, discourse theory, feminism, neo-Rousseauianism, radical environmentalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Christianity, and related ideologies.¹⁴

3.29 Make Australia Fair argued that where ideological activism is entrenched in the academia of education faculties, there is crossover into school teaching. 'After all, universities provide the theoretical underpinning for school curricula and teaching and training of future school teachers.'¹⁵

13 *Teachers Registration and Standards Act 2004*, South Australia, <http://www.trb.sa.edu.au/pdf/Teachers%20Registration%20and%20Standards%20Act%202004.pdf>, S. 35 (1), (2) & (3), accessed 22 September 2008.

14 Dr Mervyn Bendle, *Submission 5*

15 Mr Noel McCoy, *Committee Hansard*, 9 October 2008, pp 38–39.

3.30 The committee has no way of assessing the veracity of this claim, particularly in regard to what is taught to B.Ed and other trainee teachers, but it suspects that it is wildly exaggerated. Such content would be beyond the comprehension of many students for whom it would have no practical use. Such comments as these neither enlighten the committee nor persuade it of a case to be made. Indeed, the committee believes that the case That Make Australia Fair makes for the existence of a leftist conspiracy in education faculties and schools borders on the farcical.

3.31 Education consultant and former teacher Kevin Donnelly has long argued that the content of senior secondary English and History courses has been progressively 'watered down'. In the case of English, students have fewer opportunities to study noted authors and literary works as they are partly displaced by contemporary literature which is considered to be more 'relevant' to the interests of today's youth. In history, there is more emphasis placed on marginal themes which may have contemporary relevance, but which provide scant insight into events and movements occurring a century or more ago.

3.32 Donnelly's submission describes the effects of social and cultural changes over the past forty years on school curriculum. The argument goes that teachers have become tied up with radical political ideas which influence what is taught in the classroom.

Over the last 30 or so years schools have been pressured to adopt a progressive and new age stance on issues as diverse as multiculturalism, the environment, the class war, peace studies, feminism and gender studies. The Australian Education Union argues that teachers should support students who protest against the war in Iraq, professional organizations argue that the purpose of education should be to empower students to overthrow the status quo and subject associations politicise education by arguing that subjects like English must be used to teach students the correct way to vote, that is, against conservative governments. Generally speaking, students no longer have the opportunity to study history or literature in any systematic or balanced way and, as a result, many leave school culturally illiterate and ethically challenged.¹⁶

3.33 The committee takes the view that the crusading political agenda of the left, as described by Donnelly is vastly overstated. Its view of the teaching profession generally is that it is basically conservative, and no more politically-minded than other sectors of the workforce. Donnelly has also expressed concern about certain teaching 'fads' and the loss of rigour in parts of the curriculum, but, there is no clear connection between that and a drive for a radical social agenda. If teachers are consciously engaged in such a drive we have seen no evidence of it yet. The committee's perception of teacher attitudes is backed by a comment made by the President of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association:

16 Dr Kevin Donnelly, *Submission 6*, p. 9.

In terms of the work of teachers and bias, my suspicion is that the teaching profession, both through the demographic and through training, is becoming innately more conservative than it was. There are fewer examples of teachers exhibiting extreme opinion within a classroom. I think there are sometimes tensions when teachers work through processes to encourage young people to develop ideas, to discuss concepts and to test ideas. Sometimes that pedagogy is misunderstood by students and sometimes by families.¹⁷

3.34 The committee recognises the challenging circumstance in which teachers work, and the tensions which often exist in the classroom. It takes the view that isolated instances of alleged political bias are among the least of the problems to be faced by schools.

Conclusion

3.35 The committee stands on the sidelines of the 'culture wars' if only because the battlefield is already overcrowded. The committee nonetheless applauds the direction to be taken by the new National Curriculum Board to introduce a national curriculum with a focus on content rather than on outcomes-based learning. It notes with satisfaction the apparent early acceptance of a more traditional course structure for history teaching and learning and the streamlining of Maths to focus on core topics. It notes also the warnings of the head of the National Curriculum Board, Dr Barry McGaw that properly trained teachers would be an urgent requirement for teaching the new curriculum.¹⁸ The committee presumes that the increased rigour of content-based courses will require teachers with sufficient grasp of detailed knowledge. This development may lessen the intensity of the 'culture wars'.

3.36 The committee has no evidence of public concern about political bias either in the curriculum or in teaching practices in use in schools. While there may be isolated instances of intemperate or ill-considered comment made by teachers in the classroom which relate to political content, such instances of poor teaching would be insignificant overall, and trivial in comparison with poor teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. They are most likely to be the consequence of inexperience. Or they may be part of a deliberately provocative stimulus to class discussion.

3.37 The committee again draws attention to the absence of any empirical evidence of classroom bias and expresses doubt as to whether any research could show that it exists. It believes that the overwhelming majority of teachers are conservative and cautious in their approach to teaching about controversial subjects.

17 Mr Andrew Phillips, *Committee Hansard*, 8 October 2008, p. 81.

18 Farrah Tomazin, 'New curriculum's teacher challenge', *The Age*, 12 November 2008, p. 12.