

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



**Submission to the
National Curriculum Board
Comments on**

***THE SHAPE of the NATIONAL CURRICULUM:
A PROPOSAL for DISCUSSION***

December 2008

Submitted by

Amnesty International Australia

**Locked Bag 7
Collingwood, VIC 3066**

Contact:

Dr Robyn Seth-Purdie

Phone (02) 6202 7503

Fax: (02) 6257 7588

The global defender of human rights

1. About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of more than 2.2 million people across 150 countries working to promote the observance of all human rights enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other international standards.

Amnesty International Australia has approximately 80,000 members. The organisation undertakes research and action focused on preventing grave abuses of human rights, including rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination.

2. Human Rights Education and Amnesty International Australia

Human Rights Education (HRE) is a significant priority for Amnesty International Australia. We recognise it as integral to our work to build a culture of respect for human rights and help prevent rights violations.

Our Human Rights Education program involves:

- developing curriculum materials such as “Human Rights today”, a resource developed jointly with Curriculum Corporation for teachers and students at years 9 and 10
- building teachers’ capacity to teach effectively for human rights through a teacher professional learning program
- promoting a greater focus on human rights and HRE in school curricula and in the education sector
- working in partnership with other education providers, teacher professional associations and tertiary teacher education institutions in the promotion of human rights education.

Our Human Rights Education work with Australian schools builds on our extensive network of over 300 school groups which run lunchtime meetings on human rights, and school conference programs which are run in several states.

For details of our work in Human Rights Education, see <http://www.amnesty.org.au/hre> and <http://www.amnesty.org.au/humanrightstoday>.

3. AIA Response to the draft NCB’s *Shaping* paper

Amnesty International Australia (AIA) supports the concept of a National Curriculum and congratulates the work of the National Curriculum Board (NCB) in its inclusive consultative approach to canvassing broad community response to the idea of a National Curriculum.

In 2008, members and representatives of AIA have attended a number of NCB’s activities and have been impressed with the willingness of the Board to listen to participants’ attitudes with the desire to reach national consensus.

AIA's concerns, suggestions and recommendations are set out below.

The need for a strong rationale including human rights

AIA believes that the framing paper needs a strong rationale, spelling out the values and assumptions that underpin it.

Including such a rationale is an exciting opportunity to describe and shape our hopes for our young people. It should cover more than demographics, pathways, links to Australia's economic future, and four areas of the curriculum. It should say what we, as a community, aspire to for our young people in the 21st century, talking as much about values, beliefs and dispositions as about skills and understandings. Beyond this, any document defining the parameters of Australia's future education needs to be explicit in defining its underlying philosophy and values.

A strong rationale will promote understanding and acceptance of the National Curriculum amongst the teachers who will have the task of implementing curricula, and in the community.

Human rights should form a central part of the rationale, both as a statement of values for Australian society, and as a reflection of our understanding of the conditions which are essential for promoting human development. This is elaborated below.

Human rights, social values and social cohesion

Human rights and human rights education need to be incorporated in the National Curriculum both in a strong, explicit, and overarching vision about the moral and civic purposes of education, as well as in an exposition of the instrumental role of education.

Human rights enhance a nation's understanding of, and aspirations about, social cohesion and the common good. The current statement of National Goals (2008), recognises the central role of schooling in creating opportunities for young people to be 'active and informed citizens', in a 'democratic, equitable just society', but does not provide a rationale for such a position. Explicitly mentioning Human Rights Education in the National Curriculum would give direction to this citizenship focus.

In the current uncertain global context, it is imperative the national vision for education should move beyond the focus in the 1999 Goals on the 'human capital rationale of education' (Luke, 2005) in which young citizens develop attributes and dispositions that are not ends in themselves but rather are developed for the purpose of serving the nation's economic interests. There is a need for a vision of the importance and universality of human rights and not just an inference that human rights are included as an attribute of a 'good citizen' as is the case at present in the current draft paper.

Schooling is THE one common experience of all Australians, and creating a new visionary and aspirational statement in the National Curriculum that explicitly incorporates human rights and human dignity can be a powerful tool in enhancing social

harmony. AIA believes that a well-crafted rationale should reflect universal human rights values that will assist both teachers and their students to think and act positively for a better world.

The recent National Assessment Program – *Civics and Citizenship years 6 & 10 Report* (MCEETYA, 2006) examined students knowledge of civics and citizenship, including human rights issues such as “the rights and responsibilities of citizens in Australia’s democracy” and an understanding of “the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a range of contexts”. Findings indicated that

“Formal, consistent instruction has not been the experience of Australian students in civics and citizenship”, and “Although young Australians appear to accept and appreciate their democracy, their level of knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship is less than was expected by a range of experts in the field” (p 93) and that “Subsequent National Civics and Citizenship Sample Assessments may show an improvement in student performance if students receive more consistent instruction in civics and citizenship.” (p94)

Explicit inclusion of Human Rights as a concept in the National Curriculum would give strong impetus for teachers to include Human Rights in their Civics and Citizenship programs.

Explicit inclusion of Human Rights Education in the National Curriculum is consistent with the spirit of the National Goals and is a formal recognition of already-accepted beliefs and values and has the dual role of promoting human rights for both the ‘Australian common good’ and the ‘common global good’. Australia has signed all the major global instruments for the protection of Human Rights and the Government is currently undertaking a consultation on mechanisms to protect human rights. In recent times Federal, State and Territory bodies - for example, the National Committee on Human Rights Education - have been formed, and Charters of Rights have been enacted in Victoria and Australian Capital Territory to both enable and educate the community about what it means to live in a civil society.

Human rights and human development

Human rights represent the conditions that people need to flourish. This is demonstrated in accumulating evidence about the rights-related factors that influence the developmental health of children and their levels of educational achievement, as well as the health, well-being and social and economic participation of adults.

The fundamental importance of human rights to the realisation of individual potential and hence, to the structure and operation of educational institutions and teaching materials, need to be clearly reflected in evident in the framing paper, goals, and curriculum papers.

Human Rights and the principles governing the development of the national curriculum

The current draft paper lists '*Principles and Specifications for Development*', of the National Curriculum, including

- a) The curriculum should make clear to teachers *what has to be taught and to students what they should learn...*
- b) The curriculum should be based on the assumptions that all students can learn and that *every child matters...*
- e) The curriculum should provide students with an understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing, and with *knowledge, understandings and skills that will help them in their future lives.*

These principles leave it open to the Board to identify the place of values and standards that are essential in Australia's future and the place of these values and standards in the national curriculum. A major role of the NCB in developing Australia's first National Curriculum is surely to reflect an understanding of the fundamental conditions that need to be met in order for people to reach their human potential and to work for and achieve the common good.

In considering these issues, the Board might be informed by the following points:

- the disciplines in any curriculum are vehicles to achieve broader educational goals, in particular, assisting young people to value their own rights and those of others, and to live as active citizens in accordance with human rights values in a liberal and pluralist democracy which interacts with the global community
- The universality and interdependence of human rights are an essential basis for a liberal and pluralist democracy which promotes human development. In supporting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Australian government has agreed that *"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (Article 26)* and that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights [is] a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction. (preamble)*
- Every student has a right to education – a rights based framework is integral to advocating for improvements in the quality of, and access to, education.
-
- Social learning is a critical element in a young person's education, and possessing a moral and ethical framework enables young people to engage and enact appropriate community behaviours.

Amnesty International Australia considers that this development of a National Curriculum should be seen in the context of the much talked-about opportunities for an 'education revolution'.

- This "revolution" will necessarily encourage our young people to be literate and numerate, but will they understand the critical role of human rights, dignity and respect in human health and well-being?
- Will they be well-informed and articulate about key local and global issues that matter and be able to see these issues in human rights terms?
- Will they be confident of their ability to make a difference?
- Will they be equipped with understandings, skills and dispositions to work individually and with others to take action for a better world?

The explicit articulation of Human Rights in the National Curriculum, we believe, would provide a visionary rationale for our schools that will be very widely accepted and supported by our community. It would provide a basis for educators to frame their work in relation to human rights, ensuring that Australia's students:

- learn *about* human rights, developing a broad understanding of rights, informed by historical and contemporary perspectives, by discussion of key concepts and issues and by the stories of people who have made a difference.
- learn *for* human rights so that they are actively encouraged to "own" human rights values and are equipped to be actively engaged securing a future that is consistent with the vision of human rights
- learning *through* human rights, experiencing a learning environment which respects the rights of both teachers and learners, so both can experience the fulfilment of their rights through education.

4. Concerns about the process.

AIA believes that the Board's broad framing paper, *The Shape of the National Curriculum: A Proposal for Discussion* has a major role to play in shaping development of a National Curriculum and the response to that curriculum by education systems and the public. For this reason the very tight time schedule for its development is of concern. It means, inter alia, that there is very little time to accommodate the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, which has only been recently released (5 December 2008). The current draft of the NCB's *Shaping* paper refers to the goals, but surely they need to be integrated into the framing paper.

Further, the four curriculum papers are being drafted before the framing paper is completed. They will need to be completely consistent with the framing paper and embody the values it expresses.

AIA asks the NCB to ensure that the framework, goals and curriculum papers form part of an integrated whole.

5. Recommendations

Amnesty International Australia recommends that the new National Curriculum:

- Explicitly affirms the importance of human rights and human rights education, reflecting an understanding that human rights represent the conditions that people need to flourish;
- Includes human rights and human rights education as part of an overarching vision of the moral and civic purposes of education, as well as in an exposition of the instrumental role of education;
- Conveys a national vision that encompasses both a “human capital” and a “good citizen” rationale of education, both of which emphasise the importance and universality of human rights.

6. References

Luke, A. 2005, 'Curriculum, Ethics, Metanarrative: Teaching and Learning Beyond the Nation' in Nozaki, Openshaw and A. Luke, ed., *Struggles Over Difference: texts, curriculum, and pedagogies in the Asia-Pacific* (Albany: State University of New York Press).

MCEETYA. 2006, *National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship Years 6&10 Report*, Carlton South, Victoria.

Prior, W., 2008, 'Report of the 2007-08 AIA Survey with Implications for the Delivery of Teacher professional Learning', internal report, Amnesty International Australia, Collingwood.

VIT. 2007, *The Standards, Guidelines and Processes for the Accreditation of Pre-Service Teacher Education: Preparing Future Teachers*, Victorian Institute of Teaching.