Refusing History: Brendan Nelson’s National Curriculum

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This paper reports ongoing research concerning curriculum power and control. Orthodox accounts of the complex relations of state and federal governments regarding the curriculum assert subject authority is invested constitutionally in state instrumentalities, for example, the New South Wales Board of Studies. The National Curriculum Project placed considerable stress on this convention and the politics of this project are arguably reduced to state’s rights.

The Federal Minister for Education, Dr Nelson has announced one intention for education as: “It is time in this country that we realise that we need to move from eight different educational jurisdictions to one single educational framework for Australia. We need a common curriculum and educational outcomes”. Utilising discourse analysis, principally an adaptation of Foucauldian theory, this paper reports a disruptive re/reading of Nelson’s discourse within the context of the National Curriculum Project to predict Nelson’s chances for success.

I am interested in identifying Nelson’s discourse of curriculum and the fate of extant discourses. Discourse analysis is used as one means of intervening in Nelson’s construction of power and agency. For Foucault, discourse analysis reveals power/knowledge. Truth becomes a function of what can be said or written and the authority of those who speak and circulate the discourse. Meaning and reason are discursively constructed as “what can be said? and “what can be thought?” (McHoul and Grace, 1993, 36). Discourse has no hidden ‘reality’: “there is no sub-text” but an architecture of Nelson’s discourse, a logic; the result of a configuration of discursive structures. (Foucault, 1972, 119).

Discourses differ with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they take shape, and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address. I suggest Nelson’s discourse repositions the thing that we understand to be curriculum. This paper investigates the series of curriculum discourses as the ‘rules’ of speaking that Nelson has employed in an “attempt to shape with some degree of deliberation aspects of our behaviour according to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends” (Dean, 1999, 10).

Discourse(s) constitute internally coherent discrete bodies of knowledge or rationalities which “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, 49). It is through language that discourse is constituted as objects, concepts, knowledge; in other words, discourses are made manifest, nameable and describable. For Foucault, discourses emerge and function as conflict, discord and dispute. He comments, “any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry”. And “this social
appropriation of discourses” always takes place along “lines marked out by social distances, oppositions and struggles” (1971, 123).

‘Governmentality’ for Foucault, is concerned with the conduct and practices arising from discursive formation, “yet advanced, exercised and directed in and beyond formal political contexts” (Weate, 1998, 2) to included governance as “structur(ing) the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982, 221). Dean asserts, “from the perspective of those who seek to govern, human conduct is conceived as something that can be regulated, controlled, shaped and turned to specific ends” (1999, 11). Rose and Miller identify the rationalities and technologies of governmentality as “a complex of mundane programs, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to employ and give effect to governmental ambitions” (1992, 187-9). Governmentality is a reference to those processes through which objects are rendered amenable to intervention and regulation by being formulated in a particular conceptual way (Townley, 1993, 3).

Foucault argues that power is embedded in the governing systems of order, appropriation and exclusion by which subjectivities are constructed and social life formed. These principles of governmentality can be located in curriculum as manipulation, organisation and regulation. Foucault revises the Nietzschean “will to power” in which the “subject is disciplined through the rules of knowledge per se; thus pointing to the need to focus on knowledge as part of the project to disrupt the power relations embodied in educational practices” (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1997, 298).

Bernstein, Ball and Apple are a sample of theorists who link education and power/knowledge. Bernstein observes how a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control (Young, 1971, 47). Ball observes that educational sites are subject to discourse but are also centrally involved in the propagation and selective dissemination of discourses, the ‘social appropriation’ of discourses (1990, 3). Apple asserts that

What counts as knowledge, the ways in which it is organised, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and just as critically-who is allowed to ask and answer all these questions, are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in this society (1996, 22).

Foucault introduced the term ‘biopower’,

to designate forms of power exercised over persons specifically in so far as they are thought of as living beings: a politics concerned with subjects as members of a population, in which issues of individual sexual and reproductive conduct interconnect with issues of national policy and power (Gordon, 1991, 4-5).
Biopower is directed both in a totalising manner, at whole populations and, at one and the same time, at individuals so that they are both individualised and normalised. Nelson’s regulatory curriculum discourse is a discursive construction that relies on selective discourses with a set of rules and appropriations or analogies with other discourses. The rules of discourse Nelson uses reject or forget previous formations of what a student, a family, a teacher, and a school can each be.

The immediate object of my analysis is a selection of text by Brendan Nelson who I acknowledge speaks as a politician not a scholar. My analysis of Nelson’s discourse is taken from three spoken texts, which will be treated as a single site. They are: the Official Report of Hansard, a verbatim report of question time proceedings in the House of Representatives; a transcript downloaded from the Internet of an interview conducted with Brendan Nelson on ‘Meet the Press’ by Paul Bongiorno with Michelle Grattan from ‘The Age’ and Ebru Yaman from ‘The Australian’; and an article printed in ‘The Australian’ titled ‘Nelson plan to reform schools’ by Political Editor Dennis Shanahan.

These three texts were selected from a wide variety of sources on the basis of their immediacy and suitability as texts. For Foucault, the author function produces discourse, without guarantee of the authority to control it. Discourse analysis decentres the author by focusing on the formation and structure of the discourse. Each source imposes and assigns slightly different emphasis upon Nelson’s discourse, with each context producing a different necessity. Question time on May 28th 2003 was the first reference that I am familiar with that reveals Nelson’s preference for a “national curriculum”. The sovereignty of Hansard is its authority as official discourse and its persistence as discursive text.¹ It is the authority of the institutional site in which this discursive formation of curriculum can be articulated that records and preserves the discourse. However, the interview transcript and the newspaper article, as ephemeral documents are not subject to refinement.

In announcing, “It is time in this country that we realise that we need to move from eight different educational jurisdictions to one single educational framework for Australia. We need a common curriculum and educational outcomes”, Nelson appears to make an ambitious return to a national curriculum.

Any suggestion for a national curriculum produces anxiety for those, like myself, in art education, who rejected the Hawke/Keating government’s intervention in state curriculum. New South Wales’ art educators led the dissent arguing the debilitation of subject matter in favour of profiles as an unwelcomed emphasis on objectives, competencies and outcomes. Weate states

¹ Hansard is a full report, in the first person, of all speakers alike, which, though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, http://www.legis.gov.bc.ca/hansard/8-5.htm).
The response to a National Art Curriculum has not been one of renewing, deepening and enriching theory, nor the innovation of a new and contemporary view of curriculum and art education, coupled with an infusion of the peculiarities of local knowledge and concerns. The national curriculum statement has been identified as articulating that which can be seen as common and fundamental, national agreements (1993, 6).

The development of a “common language, an agreed statement of key learning areas, and an agreed ‘profile’ representing the typical learning progression of students as they moved through each key learning area” (Seddon, 2001, 318) was viewed by Brown as a “distortion of subject matter” and “a symptom of an inherently political agenda” (1994, 57). Others such as Boughton contended that the bureaucratic compulsion of governments to standardise practices in order to gain control over outcomes was troublesome for arts education where diversity and variousness of theoretical frameworks should be valued (1993, 64). A single framework was recognised as antagonistic to the arts, “that not all subjects can or should be compartmentalised using this reductionist approach” (Marsh, 1994, 28). Macpherson comments

More than 200 Arts academics expressed concern that the profiles were thinly veiled competencies. Competencies are an anathema to the Arts. Why? Because the visual and performing arts profile components appear to isolate complex performances from their explanatory contexts of beliefs and value. Tasks are rendered meaningless by their separation from the disciplines that provide essential concepts and meaning. Put simply, some profiles seem to be conceptually inadequate (1993, 33).

Opposition to the national curriculum project was, Haynes observes, based on “a perception that the necessary educational components of quality, autonomy and understanding could not be counted in the form of assessment of competencies required by the national profiles” (1993, 2). Is Nelson’s announcement for a return to a national curriculum a vexed question for the arts?

Seddon (2001) provides one account of the events of the national curriculum. One explanation for the 1980s and 1990s demise of the national curriculum is that State’s rights prevailed. Seddon states “ultimately this control by agreement and uncertainty, which underpinned the Commonwealth’s attempt to manage by consensus unravelled in the face of traditional state-federal politics. States would not undercut their historic control of school education ...” (2001, 318). Curriculum became subject to “outcomes-based funding and performance indicators” which Seddon asserts “endorsed traditional power relationships”. Seddon suggests however that this governance and control provided for the reconstitution of curriculum as a “diversification of identity”. A range

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2 These issues are taken up in their entirety in The University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts 1994 Forum, What is Wrong with the National Profiles?
of curricula could then be tailored to meet client demands and needs. Whilst Seddon believes that a return to a unified national curriculum is not possible, what the events of the national curriculum project provided for was the opportunity for “every social group to establish their own educational pathways and begin to erode the stranglehold that dominant social groups have on what is taught and to whom” (2001, 326).

Curiously, Nelson is advocating consistency between the states with an interesting amnesia to this state rivalry. Nelson’s discourse is one of simplicity in thinking curriculum is divisible as ‘one’ opposed to ‘eight’. Whilst the national curriculum as a distinct event failed with the Australian Education Council (AEC) deciding “to scuttle the nationally consistent curriculum project” (Ebert, 1993, 63), the responsibility of curriculum still resting with the states has meant that apparatuses and instruments of its formation continue. The power/knowledge of the national curriculum has enabled a discourse that is sufficiently known and spoken.

An issue of Curriculum Perspectives in 1993 reports the different perspectives that stakeholders held in regard to the July, 1993 AEC meeting in Perth. Nicholas Cockshutt, Director of Curriculum with the Northern Territory Department of Education stated

in one sense it is disappointing that we do not have the assurance of nationwide acceptance of the documents as they stand, but that was probably never likely anyway, and it does leave us with more freedom to adapt them to suit our own needs” (1993, 14).

Ken Eltis, Head, School of Teaching and Curriculum Studies, University of Sydney, said

NSW has stuck to the original spirit and intent of national collaboration set in train about seven years ago, and is now doing what was always intended – using national outcomes as a source of information to be referred to as various local documents are revised (1993, 12).

Nelson’s current discourse may prevail as the power/knowledge, however, previous curriculum discourses will continue.

The individual states continued to circulate the discourse of a national curriculum irrespective of the sovereign position. Another observer commented that the decision of the AEC “has been represented as a rejection (which it wasn’t) of a national curriculum (which was never proposed). In fact, the Ministers considered a set of documents, not a national curriculum” (Wilson, 1993, 38). The existence of discursive institutional formations, which includes national curriculum documents, has great potency for the maintenance and continued circulation of the national curriculum discourse.

State and Territory Governments continue to be vigilant in preserving States’ rights in the area of education. Marsh and Stafford (1984) however have shown that over the last one hundred years, there has been collaboration between states and federal
governments on at least 30 occasions. I will now turn to an historical sketch as a background to state and federal relations.

Dean and Hindess assert

The reforms of the 1990s depended on long-standing State-Commonwealth negotiations on educational provision, which had continued since the post-war period and throughout the Commonwealth School Commission’s work during the 1970s and the Commonwealth’s efforts in the 1980s to coordinate curriculum, assessment, certification and access and equity programs at a national level, developments culminating in the programmatic 1988 statement ‘Strengthening Australia’s Schools’ (1998, 24).

The provision for Australian education has been a State responsibility since the end of the nineteenth century when state controlled systems of ‘free, compulsory and secular’ schooling were established in the Australian colonies. In effect this placed all decision-making with the central board of each State and which was in turn responsible to the respective Minister of Education. The period from the middle of the twentieth century onwards however marked increasing commonwealth involvement in education.

One such involvement has been the commonwealth’s funding provisions. During the 1950s and 1960s increased involvement by the commonwealth government in education was forthcoming. In the early 1960s the AEC requested the commonwealth give direct assistance to state schools. Its first response was to provide grants for the effective teaching of science. These funds, along with the Commonwealth Secondary Scholarships, which encouraged students to complete full secondary education programs, were made available to both private and government schools. Financial assistance was provided to primary and secondary independent schools on a per capita basis and in 1969, funds were provided for the Library Program for building or extending school libraries. Marsh and Stafford assert that “within one decade, the dominance of the state secular systems of education had been attacked by a series of specific reforms and then a recurrent financial assistance plan which laid the way open to further incursions in the decades to follow” (1984, 100).

The scale of commonwealth involvement in primary and secondary education increased with the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972. Whitlam asserts

The most enduring single achievement of my Government was the transformation of education in Australia. The Government achieved a number of notable firsts in education. It established the Australia Schools Commission and Technical and Further Education Commission. It distributed funds to schools on the basis of need. It assumed full financial responsibility for tertiary education and abolished fees for tertiary and technical education. It continued to expand the involvement of the Australian Government in education funding (1985, 315).
One major organization created by the commonwealth government in the 1970s was the Curriculum Development Centre located in Canberra. In 1981 the concept of a national core curriculum led to the development of The Core Curriculum for Australian Schools by the since abandoned Curriculum Development Centre. The Curriculum Development Centre was created at a time when Commonwealth-State relationships were at a high point, and previous cooperative ventures between States augured well for a centralised agency which could provide leadership in curriculum development activities and provide information services (Marsh and Prideaux, 1993, 32).

The 1970s and the Curriculum Development Centre embodied the happy coincidence of a significant injection of funds from Federal sources with the dominance of theories of curriculum resource inputs.

Currently the historical record credits national intervention in education in the 1980s with Federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins. Dawkins is attributed the responsibility for setting the agenda of the national curriculum project. In Strengthening Australia’s Schools, Dawkins asserts

Government recognises the primary responsibility of the State for the education of young people. It also recognises its own responsibilities to provide national leadership. Accordingly it is inviting the cooperation of the States to develop and implement a national effort to strengthen the capacity of our schools to meet the challenges they face (1988, Forward).

In 1990, the Curriculum Development Centre was transmuted into the Curriculum Development Corporation, which later formed the Curriculum Corporation. The Curriculum Corporation’s role was to develop and encourage the implementation of national curriculum principles. The Curriculum Corporation is ‘owned’ by the territory, state and national governments, with New South Wales latterly becoming a member. Curriculum development in New South Wales is a responsibility of the Board of Studies. Established under the Education Reform Act 1990 (NSW), the Board of Studies is an independent statutory authority of the State. Kemmis asserts

One of the great strengths of the CC is that it is proposed neither as a Commonwealth nor a Federal arrangement, but as a national organization, assuming that all states and territories in the end agree to participate (1990, 30).

The Curriculum Corporation still occupies a field of presence as the apparatus that assumes the “responsibilities of the Commonwealth in relation to State and Territory governments in the provision of education within a national perspective” (Kemmis, 1990, 5). Despite the ‘scuttling’, support is still available. Bruce Wilson, Curriculum Manager of the Curriculum Corporation comments
The quick answer is that the national education agenda is alive and well ... What this reveals is that work continues nationally to enable states and territories to gain the benefit of seven years of collaboration" (1993, 38).

As I suggest in the following analysis, Nelson’s discourse ignores this history of co-operation between state and federal government. Nelson’s neglect of the Curriculum Corporation as an agency and structure of curriculum heightens our uncertainty of his proposals. I predict that Nelson will not use this discourse of curriculum that repeatedly emphasised the collaborative model of the national curriculum. Nelson’s discourse of curriculum prevents any form of a national curriculum because it is effectively a null government and small government that shifts responsibilities to the family.

In this section, I apply a methodology of Foucauldian discursive analysis to a selection of Nelson’s language. I will address the rules of discourse that Nelson is using to produce his national curriculum.

Nelson has declared that there is a problem of “jurisdictions”: “We would not be giving service to young Australians if we just accept that we are eight jurisdictions. I see it as our responsibility” to remedy this predicament. Nelson provides no description or explanation for eight jurisdictions as a problem. Nelson produces a discourse of deficiency and pessimism at the current state of Australian education.

The strength of Nelson’s discourse is established by the recurrence and accumulation of the analogous discourse of nationalism. Nelson says ‘national curriculum’ only once, announcing that “national consistency in outcomes” does not mean “the mediocrity of a national curriculum”. Yet national, once disengaged from curriculum, repeatedly qualifies and adds value to the few surviving curriculum concepts in this discourse. The limitations of the normalising ‘common’ and ‘consistency’ are given authority by Nelson, as a ‘national need’, however the need for national consistency is never explained as the appeal to the authority of nationalism will suffice. The nationalistic discourse that Nelson articulates is “Australia’s national interest” and “proud and well-developed Australians”. Benedict Anderson’s well rehearsed ‘imagined communities’ of the nation state describe enactments of discourses of honour, belonging, connection, identity politics and patriotism utilised in the banalities of advertising, the discipline of sport, the ‘heroics’ of military service. Nationalism elevates the problem and the solution.

Nelson uses a delimited set of statements for curriculum focused on the person as an individual in the family unit all of which are narrowly framed in economic terms. As a field of memory, the discourses of curriculum that precede this moment are forgotten. Nelson the discursive site is yet however to invent the apparatuses and instrumentalities of his discourse. Nelson has constructed education as a regulatory legislation to produce normalised subjects. In an attempt to regulate the possibilities of different practices, Nelson’s discourse has “designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed” (Foucault, 1982, 221). I will now turn my
attention to my sources of Nelson’s discourse treated as a site that produce a curriculum discourse that is effectively regulation. They are: the individual student; the family; the teacher; and the school.

The Individual Student
Nelson’s discourse of the ‘student’ is one logic to the curriculum. Nelson uses ‘the student’ or ‘students’ who are the ‘target population’ thirty-two times. His knowledge of the individuals of these reforms acts as a dividing practice. Students are classified as “Aboriginal students”, “students in government state schools”, “every student in a non-government school”, “those students in those so-called elite government schools”, “the average student”, “all Australian students”, “high school students”, “primary school students”, “students in Queensland”, “disadvantaged students”, amongst others. These are categories of the type of funding government will provide. They are categories of exclusion.

All pretence to the curriculum as equity is reduced. This dominant discourse in curriculum is threatened by the positivist-empirical thinking of Nelson who positions curriculum as a monotype rather than recognition of diversity. Government funding in education has assisted in constructing education and the curriculum as a principle instrument of democracy. An instance of government funding to schools to assist in the development of policies in relation to disadvantage and equality is the ‘The Participation and Equity Program’ launched in 1983. Rizvi and Kemmis assert that the PEP can be viewed as the practical solution [to problems of] economic decline and unemployment, the continuing State Aid issue, the need for educational systems to serve diverse objectives and a pluralistic community, and the promotion of the objective of equality of educational opportunity (1987, 53).

More recently, the government has retreated from such funded programs to a focus on outputs rather than inputs. Although the rhetoric of inclusivity and equity remains, a market driven discourse has replaced a discourse of diversity. Nelson’s discourse of the population is as a mono-standardised entity, which consequently produces a narrow range of curriculum possibilities.

The discourse of the ‘student’ has been “transformed from a swarming mass into an organised grid” (Ransom, 1997, 46). These “personal and collective identities”, according to Dean and Hindess are “made-up through particular forms of reasoning and technologies so that they might be worked with and upon to different ends” (1998, 11). Nelson’s individualisation of discourses is attempting to satisfy familial and social expectations by convincing the educational community that these changes to the curriculum will maintain intense attention to each individual, while differentiating between individuals within an education population.
By emphasising the importance of pastoral attention to each individual, Nelson is promoting the ‘government’ as taking responsibility for improvements in the conditions and quality of students’ lives. For Foucault, the education population is being shaped by the ‘governmentalization’ of the state. Foucault (1991) maintains that these ‘pastoral bureaucratic’ obligations to care for the population stem from the states’ own interest in maintaining a peaceful and governable citizenry, and in avoiding social or sectoral conflicts that undermine the security and prosperity of the state (Dean and Hindess, 1998, 36-7).

Foucault’s interest in discourse and its relation to the discursive production of the individual is a basis for understanding the ‘will to truth’ underlying Nelson’s ambitions. According to Miller Foucault’s works comprise the most outstanding contribution to our understanding of how the government of individuals in western societies operates through a variety of discourses and practices which seek to constitute human individuals as subjects, and do so through notions of truth (1987, 12).

Foucault sees the technologies of domination and self as being the techniques used ‘to make of the individual a significant element for the state’ (1982, 153). Foucault focuses on the connections between ways in which individuals are politically objectified and political techniques for integrating concrete aspects of their lives and activities into the pursuit of the state’s objectives (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991, 123).

Nelson’s discourse of diversity is at play with a discourse of standardising. Nelson has combined individualisation with regular and systematic normalisation through proposals that “children will begin schooling at the same age, we will have national testing against national benchmarks on literacy and numeracy and scientific literacy with reporting to parents, that we will have a common testing arrangement for Year 12 …”. In Discipline and Punish Foucault highlights the importance of “normalising judgement” or normalisation in the modern disciplinary power. Foucault explains that such normalising judgement often occurs through comparison, such that individual actions are referred “to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed” (1979, 182). Standardised starting ages and Nelson’s push towards standardised national testing is a “governmental rationality … simultaneously about individualising and totalising: that is, about finding answers to the question of what it is for an individual, and for a society or population to be governed or governable” (Gordon, 1991, 36). Weate (1998) observes that everyone must simultaneously be the same and different “within a tolerable bandwidth of variation” (Gordon, 1991, 20).

By implementing a “common starting age” curriculum content is represented as being ‘age governed’. The curriculum becomes from this point of view, a classificatory and organisational device whereby common norms are expected and reproduced by the placement and position of the student. Standard refers, in Nelson’s discourse, to fixed, common and normalised measures. By rendering individual subjectivity calculable, and
in being able to calculate normalising student achievement and behaviour, Nelson’s discourse produces a means of regulating the populace.

Quoting Johann von Justi, *Elements genereaux de police* (1768), Donzelot asserts,

> The science of policing consists, therefore, in regulating everything that relates to the present condition of society, in strengthening and improving it, in seeing that all things contribute to the welfare of the members that compose it. The aim of policing is to make everything that composes the state serve to strengthen and increase its power and likewise serve the public welfare (1979, 7).

Nelson employs policing regulations whereby the overall good of the governed populations serve to justify these regulations.

**The Family**

The “government of individuals” in education is a technique or form of power that is promoted by Nelson as a conservative family discourse. The state can only operate, according to Foucault, “on the basis of other, already existing power relations ... (i.e.) a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth (1978, 122).

Schools, Nelson says, should be “an extension of family life”. We witness a transition from a government of families to a government through the family (Donzelot, 1979, 92). Pusey observes that “middle Australia is busy redefining how the family will and even should function” (2003, 85) under the Howard Government.

For Foucault, the art of government is concerned with the introduction of economy into political practice. ‘Economy’, according to Foucault, refers to the ‘wise government of the family for the common welfare of all’ (Burchell et al., 1991, 92). Foucault continues that, “to govern a state will therefore mean to apply economy ... a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of the family over his household and his goods” (Burchell et al., 1991, 92).

The social and economic aspirations of the family act as a vehicle and instrument of government by according the same principles of running a family to the ‘good government of the state’. Nikolas Rose comments on the family:

> The modern private family remains intensely governed, it is linked in so many ways with social, economic, and political objectives. But government here acts not through mechanisms of social control and subordination of the will, but through the promotion of subjectivities, the construction of pleasures and ambitions, and the activation of guilt, anxiety, envy and disappointment (Donald, 1992, 92).
Nelson’s discourse of the ‘family’ is through two opposing presences. On the one hand the family is the valued object, representing a desired state of affairs. The family entity is defined by Nelson’s discourse as a fixed unit that will benefit from the Government’s assistance. The language of this discourse is of ‘service’: “used to greater assist families”; “meet the needs”; “in the interests of” – all to impel and implore “families” towards a consensus with the government’s beliefs and goals. The family is to be protected in Nelson’s discourse with the Government able to manage itself around this narrow concept of the family.

On the other hand, when speaking of the parent, the language of this discourse is of responsibility and in control of the family’s pursuits. Foucault notes that “when a state is well run, the head of the family will know how to look after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means the individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (Burchell et al., 1991, 92). Nelson promotes the head of the family as a form of government. The discourse of the parent signals a paternalism that assumes responsibility in the form of a ‘business man’: “some senior business people would not shift interstate because of concerns about school difference”. The parent is represented as the agency assigned the obligation for implementing government policy.

Parents are assigned agency, action and power, as they are responsible for choosing and funding their child’s education. Curriculum is being rewritten into ‘parental choice’, by creating a relationship between parents and funding, Nelson’s discursive formation constructs the object that is curriculum according to where the parent decides to send his or her child: “Commonwealth Government has been the predominant source of public resourcing for those parents who choose to send their children to Catholic and independent schools”; “those students in those so-called elite government schools...hard work and sacrifices of parents who just choose to send their children to them”; “the kind of school that their parents choose to send them to”. Nelson’s discourse of education is organised and classified by student and family funding categories.

The family has been re-written into an economic unit and a pastoral care entity. This is a new discourse for education. The discourse of equity, as previously discussed, is threatened by this vexed family discourse. The parental agency is no longer participation by involvement. Choosing and paying for education becomes the only measure of value in Nelson’s curriculum discourse.

The Teacher
The discourse of the teacher is an absent presence throughout Nelson’s discourse. The words ‘teacher’ and ‘teaching’ appear only ten times throughout this site. On the one hand the teacher is scarce within Nelson’s discourse. Weate states “the teacher’s knowledge is marginalised and replaced by the role of the overseer, ensuring the precision of the system” (2000, 3). On the other, the “professionalism of teachers” is to be the agency of Nelson’s reforms – they are a means to an end. ‘School differences’ is spoken in proximity to ‘teacher professionalism’ in Nelson’s discourse: “nationally
consistent, nationally recognised and accredited professional development programs for
teaching professional and quality assurance”. The word ‘professional’ only appears in
series with the word teacher. According to Foucault teachers are enclosed in “a web of
discourses which sometimes address them, sometimes speak about them, or impose
canonical bits of knowledge on them, or use them as a basis for constructing a science
that is beyond their grasp – all this together enables us to link an intensification of the
interventions of power to a multiplication of discourse” (1978, 30).

The School
It is interesting here to consider Nelson’s constitution of the ‘school’. Nelson’s discursive
statements regarding schools are repeatedly placed in close proximity to State and
Commonwealth funding. Nelson speaks in terms of State and Commonwealth financial
assistance to schools. As a mechanism of power/knowledge, a repeated discourse and
strategy of this government is a deliberate antagonism towards the states. Nelson
emphasises the Government as the primary stakeholder in education, claiming power
over schools within this accountability framework: “the Commonwealth has increased
its funding to state government schools by 5.5% but the States and Territories have
increased by only 2.1%”; “Had the State and Territory governments … used the
Commonwealth indexation mechanism this year, there would be $670 million more
this year alone to support the education of our 2.2 million students”; “the states need
to keep up with the Commonwealth”.

Nelson’s discourse of the curriculum is decreasingly that of content. One of Nelson’s
discursive rules when speaking about education is to overwhelm with an audacious
display of citing numbers. The curriculum is rewritten into copious statistics and data.
Nelson employs the safe neutrality of numbers and the status of statistics to advance his
curriculum discourse. Pasquino (1991) identifies statistics as ‘the science of the state’, as
‘political arithmetic’ endlessly providing the state with data, lists, numbers, and
information. Foucault observes, “one began to count in quarter hours, in minutes, in
seconds” (1979, 50). It would appear that Nelson conforms to the saying of the
physicist Lord Kelvin, ‘that when you can measure what you are speaking about, you
know something about it; when you cannot measure it … your knowledge is of a
meagre and unsatisfactory kind’ (Hacking in Burchell et al., 1991, 186). An example of
Nelson employing a numerical figure with no relative context is the issue of the “80,000
students moving between states each year”. Nelson does not distinguish, that of the
3.34 million students in Australian schools, it is 2.4% of the student population that are
subjected to a different curriculum when moving interstate. This is an example of
Nelson’s contradictory assemblage of ideas.

Built into the architecture of Nelson’s discourse of curriculum is that of ‘international
competitiveness’. This is a new site for curriculum discourse. Nelson asserts “we can’t,
any longer, I think, equip Australians to be internationally competitive when we’ve got
eight different education jurisdictions within one country”. Nelson provides no rationale
for the need for national consistency in education. By bringing into the orbit of his
discourse current agendas of globalisation and security, Nelson is according authority to
his discourse by making his proposed reforms applicable to more than national consistency. Nelson is positioning a new fear in education.

This new site for curriculum discourse brings into the field of presence post-secondary education. Curiously, Nelson’s new discourse of curriculum is constructed around two opposing presences: “Different starting and completion ages”. In Discipline and Punish Foucault traces the development of penal styles, beginning with the spectacular public execution to the prevailing control of activity in prison. Foucault states, “we have, then, a public execution and a time-table” (1979, 7). Nelson has a ‘birthday party’ and a ‘university entrance score’. Nelson’s discourse implies that this ‘problem’ of a lack of “national consistency in outcomes” is fuelling problems in tertiary education with “330 different exams to actually get into university”. The language of this discourse is one of both fear and desire. Nelson’s attempts to seduce us to his view with a discursive analogy that “if John Kennedy in the first year that he’s president can set the target of putting a man safely on the moon and returning him to earth, surely we can set an objective for this decade to say that by the year 2010, in every part of Australia children will begin schooling at the same age …. [and] we will have a common testing arrangement for Year 12 …”. Nelson heightens this fear in education by employing ‘risk’, as a calculative rationality that “renders reality in such a form as to make it amenable to types of action and intervention” (Dean, 1999, 178). The educational population will be at risk if Nelson’s proposals are not endorsed.

I suggest that Nelson the discursive site circulates curriculum as a point of diffraction between the forgotten memory of the national curriculum and the delimited post-welfarist curriculum of a network of people and schools distributed as commodities with differing economic status. In this discourse the conservative restoration of mono-cultural family values is rewarded as equity and diversity are abandoned. Curriculum as just that – curriculum - is hardly mentioned. The discursive regularity requires the rarity of ‘national’ – national outcomes, national consistency. National is concomitant with one, rather than eight. The efficiency of the marketplace and the desirable ‘imagined community’ of nation intervene and rewrite old curriculum discourses.

References


Ebert, L. (1993) ‘From the President’. Curriculum Perspectives, 13(4) 63-64.


Appendix

Sources


