



## OPINION

A move by principals to simplify the primary curriculum by concentrating on a smaller number of subjects has triggered a backlash from those who believe important disciplines will be devalued.

# Why we must fear core values

## The case for language.

By MICHAEL CLYNE

The Primary Principals Association has released a draft charter that it claims is a "strategic, thoughtful and forward-looking statement of (the purposes of primary schooling)", which begins to equip "our children to lead the nation through the 21st century".

These principles are sensible and commendable. But if we view the curriculum areas that are proposed as the core areas, which should "equip children to play a part in the world beyond the school", they are narrow and limiting: English literacy, mathematics (including numeracy), science and history (which "shows children their place in the world through learning about important stories, people and events from the history of Australia and Australians").

The glaring omission in the draft charter is recognition of the increasing trends towards globalisation, and the fundamental need to equip students to participate in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world. The need for the development of intercultural awareness and understanding through the study of languages has been incorporated into curriculum documents in Australia and in most other OECD countries.

Peter Cosgrove, former head of the Australian Defence Forces, has stated "languages skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of the world order".

With a narrow emphasis on English literacy and the relegation of languages other than English to the category of supplementary subject, you might wonder how small the world is to which the principals are wishing to condemn future generations of Australians.

There are many reasons why languages other than English should be among the core subjects at primary school. Some concern the crucial role of languages in the total education of the young child, others future benefits.

In a recent report to the British Council, English linguist David Graddol establishes that within 10 to 15 years, English will have become a basic skill around the world and that those who in addition know other languages will have the edge.

All European Union countries other than Britain now require children to take a second language at primary school and most EU countries and many Asian ones have three languages compulsory in education. Finland, which consistently outperforms Australia in student achievements, does not find the curriculum too crowded to require all students to take three languages throughout school.

Languages need to be given adequate time. Currently, 97.8 per cent of Victorian primary school programs give less than the

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government-recommended 150 minutes a week — that is, languages are treated as supplementary subjects. In a recent survey by the Australian Council of State School Organisations, 70 per cent of parents wanted languages to be compulsory from early primary school to year 10, and 90 per cent of parents and 70 per cent of children believed learning a language would help their understanding of the world.

The monolingual world that the the draft blueprint would introduce to children is not even present-day Australia.

The 2006 census shows, for instance, that 27.9 per cent of Melburnians and 31.4 per cent of Sydneysiders speak a language other than English at home, and that doesn't even take into account those who speak a LOTE regularly but not in their own homes.

Languages are needed in the core to give monolingual English speakers some of the experience of practising bilingualism, which most children in the world have. Young children are very flexible in attitudes and in some of the skills that are needed to acquire a second language

The draft blueprint erroneously assumes that literacy can only be acquired in English and assumes that other languages take time away from literacy. In fact, international and Australian literature convincingly shows that literacy can be acquired in more than one language and that literacy skills can be transferred between languages (even between ones with different writing systems).

Research by psychologists at Monash University has demonstrated a direct link between learning a second language in early



primary school and reading readiness in English, the children's first language. This is not surprising, as acquiring a second language increases one's preoccupation with, and understanding of, the structure of words, of sentences and of sound systems, which are so important in the acquisition of literacy.

Literacy is like learning to walk: it is only acquired once, even if adjustments have to be made when you walk backwards, uphill, in the water or on ice. The principals' understanding of literacy having to be acquired separately in each language is contradicted by research into speech processing. Adequate programs in a second language are an important contribution to literacy.

Victoria has been at the forefront of developments in primary school language and bilingual programs since the early 1980s. We owe it to our children for these programs to be improved and enhanced, not undermined.

Michael Clyne is professorial fellow in languages and linguistics at the University of Melbourne and emeritus professor at Monash University.

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## The case for geography.

By SUSY PUSZKA AND  
LEONIE BROWN

The concept of schools struggling under the burden of an overcrowded curriculum is not new. Increasingly, schools are being called upon to educate students in areas which, while undeniably worthy, would once have been considered the responsibility of parents and the broader community.

The consequent growth in the breadth of curriculum offered by schools has coincided with a focus on providing a rigorous core curriculum. School administrators and curriculum developers are, unsurprisingly, frustrated by the need to fit in more and more, while maintaining academic standards. There are, after all, only so many hours in one school day.

The Australian Primary Principals Association's proposed charter is obviously a response to this quandary. According to the association's president, Leonie Trimper, the charter is a bid to

"unclutter" the curriculum in primary schools, paring the "guaranteed" subjects down to four core subjects. The burning question is: why has geography, a traditional mainstay of the curriculum, been left off the list of core subjects?

In the recent debate over the need for a national curriculum, geography was also conspicuously overlooked by both major political parties. So, is geography vital to every student's education throughout their compulsory school years? The answer is a resounding yes.

Most people would agree it is important for students to be "spatially literate". We have all laughed at the jokes aimed at US citizens who seem to be somewhat geographically challenged.

If we are going to be high-functioning global citizens, knowing where other places of significance are is a good start. Some knowledge of their culture, physical attributes,

regional alliances and political persuasion would be even better.

The study of other cultures and places coaxes students to look beyond their own world and develop a less parochial perspective, which is surely an important quality in our increasingly globalised world.

Geography can also provide students with more knowledge of their own environment. Much has been said of the importance of students learning Australian history. A natural corollary must surely be that it is also important for all Australians to be familiar with our nation's major natural features and its human characteristics. Both are important in building a national identity. But geography can be so much more than the simple learning of facts that will impress friends at a quiz night. Geography seeks a deep understanding of the world and all

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# Why geography is essential

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its natural and human complexities. Students not only learn where places are and what they and the people who inhabit them are like, but also why this is so.

Geography students are able to analyse the spatial and temporal distribution of phenomena, the processes that create these phenomena, and the interaction between human and natural components of the world around them. For example, students could investigate how climates have changed over time, the factors that have caused the observed fluctuations, the predicted impacts for various parts of the world, and the relative importance of natural and anthropogenic factors affecting the current climate.

Many of the most pressing issues facing our society are geographic in nature; a flick through any newspaper on any given day would attest to this. Climate change, water security, the Murray-Darling Basin, forest management, our ageing population, planning matters, geopolitical conflict and development issues — all are topics students can examine within the geography classroom.

If we want a well-informed and civic-minded population, we can do no better than encourage the study of geography.

Perhaps most importantly, the study of geography can provide a means of considering what can be done to resolve issues. Students can sometimes feel powerless at the



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magnitude of some issues, but by examining what can be done to respond to phenomena they can develop optimism in their future.

From a pedagogical perspective, to omit geography from the curriculum is denying students a golden opportunity to engage their higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and problem solving.

Geography is an all-encompassing discipline that forms a bridge between the human and physical sciences. Students are provided with a context in which they must adopt a holistic approach to topics. It is also the perfect framework in which to consider the concept of sustainable development.

While the primary principals' draft charter is of great concern to all geography teachers — and anyone who is concerned about what students learn at school — we should perhaps take comfort in the fact the Federal Government is undertaking a study into the teaching of geography across Australia.

It will be interesting to see how events unfold in the public discourse on the teaching of geography when the study is released.

But we must reject any notion that the teaching of geography is an “unessential add-on”.

Susy Puszka, a teacher at MacRobertson Girls High School, and Leonie Brown, a teacher at Bacchus Marsh Grammar, are co-presidents of the Geography Teachers Association of Victoria.