

Equity and Quality in Literacy Education : From an Analysis of the National Curriculum Framework in Australia

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Abstract

Current global economic crisis raised the awareness to the socio-economically marginalized student, and many countries are trying to establish the social support system in order to assure high equity literacy development for those children. However, the concept of equity is controversial and political. This situation requires reconsidering the idea of equity and the pedagogical approach to realize it into classroom practice.

This paper attempts to examine the issues on equity and quality of literacy education under globalization through Australian National Curriculum. Firstly, I mentioned the curriculum policy trend with understanding the current political context in Australia. It was characterised as the transition from neo-liberalism to social democracy, and it causes the transnational literacy to assure literacy required by globalization. Secondly, I discussed the educational and political effect of the national curriculum to classroom practice. Thirdly, I mentioned the importance of social access as the basic concept to realize the high equity and high quality model of literacy education.

[Keywords] equity, quality, literacy, national curriculum, Australia

Since the current economic crisis occurred, its harmful effects and widening gaps between the rich and poor are becoming clear in various regions of the world. In this socio-economic context, stratification of students' performance has been shown by various types of research conducted by international organizations, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) of the OECD. These problems are behind the educational issues being put forward by political controversy. Particularly, there is a worldwide recognition that guaranteeing educational opportunities for children who are socio-economically disadvantaged by the social structural transformation by neoliberals is an urgent priority goal. The common feature among measures taken by these countries is the attitude in which they deal with the globalization issue by securing high equity and high-quality literacy education. (Sato et al. 2009)

On the other hand, concepts such as 'equity' and 'quality' have a wide range of meanings, and they are given various meanings by various political positions. In other words, there are various ways of discussing education by its 'equity' or 'quality'. For example, some emphasize the importance of following the dominant globalization, whereas some distance themselves from it. Furthermore, there is also a 'third way', a middle of the road stance. Therefore, we need to start the discussion by acknowledging that the discourse of equity is a field of politics, and move to some discussion on what kind of politics should be based on.

Various education policies dealing with globalization and poverty issues have been implemented by the Australian government under the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who raised an 'educational reform' in his policy platform. The Rudd government departed from the neoliberal politics of the previous Howard conservative

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government and shifted in a social democratic direction, which is based on a strong commitment to the low socio-economic background. However, when we look into those policies, the question of what is the meaning of 'policy for the marginalized people' is, in terms of its principles and practice, becomes an issue in the analysis of such measures.

This paper focuses on trends of an Australian national curriculum. In Australia, the establishment of a national curriculum has been debated but never realized in actuality before. However, the current Rudd labour government showed a roadmap for its realization and potential contents. This national curriculum framework highlights the problems of the current social democratic policies of Australia.

Behind these policy measures, there are efforts to demand the redistribution of cultural and social resources by the nation, and to assure high equity and quality of education for all children. When examining the contents of the proposed national curriculum, there are various inconsistencies and practical problems. Through the clarification of politics surrounding the 'equity' and 'quality' of education, this presentation attempts to provide an insight for Japanese education. Literacy development has not been sufficiently debated in Japan from the social justice perspective, and this presentation also attempts to show what needs to be discussed.

1. POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, primary and secondary school education is under the jurisdiction of state governments. Therefore, the Commonwealth government cannot get directly involved in these areas. The Commonwealth government made several attempts to establish the National Curriculum, but it has never been realized due to the limitations imposed by the Constitutional provisions and the ethos of Australian society.

In February 2007, the Labor Party led by Kevin Rudd released a paper proposing to establish the national curriculum in order to implement his electoral platform (Rudd & Smith, 2007). The Howard conservative government was defeated in the landslide election, and the Rudd Labor government was established. The Rudd government created the National Curriculum Board comprising representatives of state governments and catholic schools, and headed by chair Barry McGaw, who previously served as the OECD education sector director¹⁾. Under the current roadmap, it is expected that the implementation of four subjects national curriculum (K-10 English, history, science and mathematics) will be well underway in 2013 across the country.

This national curriculum is based on the 'Melbourne Declaration' (December 2008) presented by the Minister's Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). The declaration encompasses two clear objectives that the central government should address (MCEETYA, 2008). These objectives are as follows: The first objective is to pursue equity and excellence in school education. In other words, assurance of access to a high-quality school education is suggested so that factors such as socio-economic problems, gender, language, culture or ethnicity will not be disadvantages for children. The second objective is to train human resources who combine the three elements: 'successful learner', 'confident and creative individual' and 'active and informed citizen', through life-long education opportunities. Details of these three elements are summarized in Table 1.

As underlined in Table 1, a 'successful learner' is a person who obtains knowledge and skills that are necessary in the global economy, such as the ability to solve problems by utilizing a wide range of knowledge and communication skills for co-operating with others. In comparison, the elements of a 'confident and

Table 1 : Human Resources Demonstrated by the 'Melbourne Declaration'

1. Successful learners	• develop their capacity to learn and play an <u>active role in their own learning</u>. • have the essential skills in <u>literacy and numeracy</u>, and are <u>creative and productive users</u> of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas. • are <u>creative, innovative and resourceful</u>, and are able to <u>solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines</u>. • are able to plan activities <u>independently</u>, <u>collaborate</u>, <u>work in teams</u> and <u>communicate ideas</u>. • are on a pathway towards <u>continued success in further education, training or employment</u>, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives.
2. Confident and creative individuals	• have a sense of <u>self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity</u> that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing. • develop personal <u>values and attributes</u> such as honesty, resilience, empathy and <u>respect for others</u>. • have the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to establish and maintain <u>healthy, satisfying lives</u>. • <u>relate well to others</u> and form and maintain <u>healthy relationships</u>. • are well prepared for their potential life roles as <u>family, community and workforce members</u>. • embrace opportunities, make <u>rational and informed decisions about their own lives</u> and accept <u>responsibility for their own actions</u>.
3. Active and informed citizens	• act with moral and ethical integrity. • appreciate <u>Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity</u>, and have an understanding of Australia's system of government, history and culture. • <u>understand and acknowledge the value of indigenous cultures</u> and possess the knowledge, skills and <u>understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation</u> between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. • are committed to national values of <u>democracy, equity and justice</u>, and participate in Australia's civic life. • are able to <u>relate to and communicate across cultures</u>, especially <u>the cultures and countries of Asia</u>. • work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving <u>natural and social environments</u>. • are responsible global and local citizens.

(MCEETYA, 2008, pp. 8-9)

creative individual' and an 'active and informed citizen' are explained within the context of society, which enables individuals to obtain and utilize capacity, knowledge or skills (the conditions or standards in society such as human relationships, politics and culture). In particular, the latter lists social relationship specific to Australia.

These three pictures of an ideal individual are similar to the idea of 'human capital' and 'social capital' conceptualized by the OECD. In the OECD 2001 report, the former is defined as 'knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being', and the latter is defined as 'networks together with shared norms, values and understanding that facilitate co-operation within or among groups' (OECD, 2001). Furthermore, the report suggests that social capital is formed by the combination of two elements, namely structural elements (social network and citizen participation) and normative elements (trust, mutual relationship, tolerance, understanding and respect for others).

The three pictures of an ideal individual in the 'Melbourne Declaration' correspond to the OECD concepts. First, the 'successful learners' component corresponds to the concept of human capital. Second, the 'confident and creative individuals' component corresponds to the concept of social capital. Finally, the 'active and informed citizens' component corresponds to the normative element of social capital.

The Melbourne Declaration reflects the Labor Party's policy to increase the 'employability' of all citizens through school education, and pays particular attention to the growth of human resources needed in global economies (Rudd & Smith, 2007). The formulation of the National Curriculum is a means of realizing those two objectives. The National Curriculum formulation is set within the context of two co-existing attitudes: 1) the conventional social democratic stance of pursuing social justice, the national principle since the

termination of the White Australia policy ; and 2) the ‘third way’ giving working-class children wide access to education, and raising children with basic knowledge and skills, at a time when society is restructured by globalization.

In fact, this policy line is ‘imported’ from the British Labour Party after the Blair government. Tom Bentley who once worked in DEMOS, which was a think tank for the Blair government, is currently on the staff of Per Capita, an influential think tank for the Rudd administration, and is also a senior advisor to Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister (also serving as the Minister of Education). Tony Mackay, the vice-chairman of the National Curriculum Committee (currently ACARA), is also an international associate for DEMOS. The Commonwealth government places an emphasis on ‘the third way’, as witnessed in the implementation of national tests for 3, 5, 7 and 9 th grades. However, multiple approaches to realizing a socially just literacy education is possible because of these various policies, as discussed later.

2. NATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK—AN EXAMPLE FROM THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The national curriculum under the Rudd government places particular emphasis on the English and history curricula. This is because there are large disparities between states in the way these two subjects are taught (Rudd & Smith, 2007). Currently, only a large framework is developed in the National Curriculum, and detailed contents for each grade will be developed later.

Nevertheless, some suggestions have already been made with regard to equity and quality in literacy education. This paper will limit its scope to the examination of the English curriculum.

First, the direction of the national curriculum for English can be shown by the six major points in Table 2 (National Curriculum Board, 2009).

In the National Curriculum Board paper, language education is regarded as a means of pursuing equity, as illustrated in points 2 and 4 of Table 2. On the other hand, the ability to cope with globalization is also emphasized as shown in point 3. Additionally, point 5 is the very manifestation of social capital. These six

Table 2: The English Curriculum Policy

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The English national curriculum will be the basis of planning, teaching and assessment of English in Australian schools and will guide the work of both experienced and beginning teachers of English. 2. In developing the English national curriculum, those features of present-day Australia that matter to all Australians need to be considered—a view of our nation as culturally and linguistically diverse, democratic, evolving, with a history of struggles and accomplishments, and a commitment to equity and openness. 3. Equally, the curriculum needs to be developed with a future orientation. A future orientation includes an appreciation that our society is growing in its complexity and that Australians will need to interact in a global environment, know how to learn, adapt, create and communicate effectively, and interpret and use information more fluently and critically. 4. The English National Curriculum has a particular responsibility for quality learning in English language, literature and literacy. It is an important part of a renewed national effort to improve both educational achievements of all students and equity of educational provision. 5. Capabilities developed in English help individuals participate in society. Proficiency in English language affects how widely and how well young people are able to improve their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities and nation. Young Australians’ developing identities, the cultures they live in and their understanding of how identity and culture are connected are all shaped by the growing capabilities for which the English curriculum takes a major responsibility. 6. The English National Curriculum will focus on how language enables people to create meaning in a broad range of forms and contexts. It will support students to develop their knowledge of how language enables people to interact effectively, build and maintain their relationships, express and exchange their knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings and opinions and will encourage an appreciation of Australia’s literary heritage and that of other cultures. |
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(National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 4)

points are precisely the reflection of macro politics as confirmed in the first section.

To implement these policies, the English national curriculum will comprise three categories including 'language', 'literature' and 'literacy'. The category of 'language' includes the learning of reading and writing through phonics, and of learning basic English skills by acquiring knowledge on spelling, punctuation and grammar. In sum, the national curriculum aims to promote students to learn English as a linguistic system.

The category of 'literature' includes comprehension and analysis of literature from cultural, social and aesthetic perspectives. For example, it includes comprehension of styles, originality and aesthetic qualities of the texts, and, in addition, critical evaluation of the social, historical and cultural contexts of text. These categories exemplify the aims of the national curriculum not only to promote the actual comprehension of literary texts themselves but also to encourage critical reading. The paper suggests that teachers commence teaching from teaching materials that are linked to students' everyday matters and are accessible to them.

In addition, the National Curriculum Board paper stresses the importance of using a wide range of teaching materials, including materials that are likely to interest children in the multi-racial nature of Australia, in the surrounding Asian-Pacific region and Aboriginal oral folk tales. Australia is currently attempting to find a way to survive within the globalized economies by focusing on Asia, and the focus on Asia-Pacific precisely reflects such an economic objective. The stance promoting the understanding of Aboriginal tribes is common to the history curriculum. This stance reflects the Rudd Labor administration's reconciliation policy towards Aboriginals and the government's symbolic gesture of apology and reconciliation. The Rudd government's policy departs from the former Howard conservative government in a way that it does not promote the learning of traditional literature and history for increasing nationalistic awareness of Australia as a nation, but places literacy education as a part of its integration policy. This distinctive stance is one of the characteristics of the national curriculum framework.

The 'literacy' includes both 'language' and 'literature' categories. In other words, the national curriculum framework promotes pedagogy in the English language, literature and literacy, and incorporates such practices into the curriculum. To research such pedagogy, teachers should focus on issues such as: 1) speaking, listening to, reading and writing texts for different purposes and audiences; 2) reading, writing, creating and revising texts in multimodality; and 3) knowledge about the various levels of language use (word, sentence and text) and how some choices influence interpretation, emotional and critical response and purpose (National Curriculum Board, 2009).

These three categories were not designed to demonstrate specific contents of the English curriculum but were a framework used for deciding the contents. Accordingly, detailed contents of the curriculum are supposed to be decided by combining these categories.

Currently, working groups of the National Curriculum Committee are working on the details of the curriculum. The National Curriculum Board paper points out that the committee should be aware of certain issues during the working process:

- The English National Curriculum will provide flexibility and choice for teachers and students. The factors that influence this choice include school and community contexts, local learning opportunities, historical perspectives, contemporary and local issues and available learning resources.
- Ensuring that every student develops the knowledge, skills and understanding in English that enables them to participate actively in the broader community will require consideration of how best to meet the needs of every student.
- Present-day Australia is a nation in which a quarter of students do not speak English as their native

language. These students bring into Australian schools different cultural conceptions of language and a variety of languages that differ dramatically in their oral and written conventions, in their ideas about what language is, how it works, how it is written and how it contributes to their identities.

As examined in this section, the English national curriculum as literacy education encompasses three features. First, the proposed national framework includes theories that were used as outlines of literacy education policy and practices, as seen in the three categories. In other words, the approaches of phonics, cultural literacy, functional literacy and critical reading are coexisting in the proposal. Such co-existence can be seen as a compromising plan for implementing a nationally standardized curriculum. By taking such an approach, various attempts can be made at teachers' level in each state.

The second feature is the view towards Asia. According to the *Melbourne Declaration*, Australians need to become 'Asia literate', engaging and building strong relationships with Asia (MCEETYA, 2008). The national curriculum framework reflects this view and includes learning about the Asia-Pacific within the curriculum.

The third feature is the attempt to instigate an apologetic attitude towards history, reflecting the Rudd government's policy promoting reconciliation and an apology of Australia as a nation to indigenous tribes such as Aborigines.

From these three features, it is clear that the aim of the national curriculum and literacy education is the creation of a socially just society. Moreover, power structure balance is emphasized as the principle of a just society. Following these points of view, there is a clear attempt to assure access to social participation of children based on their language, culture and experiences, regardless of whether they are positioned at low socio-economic status.

3. HOW WILL THE NATIONAL CURRICULAM INFLUENCE SCHOOL EDUCATION : REACTION OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

What kind of impact will the National Curriculum have on school curriculum ? This section overviews the present situation and then discusses some potential problems.

With the example of the state of Queensland, the key concept of the curriculum issued by the Curriculum Branch²⁾ is 'the informed prescription and informed professionalism', and it consists of a large framework listing the aims, contents of learning for each grade and subjects (QSA, 2009). The large scale of the framework is based on the idea that the state curriculum should be limited to outlining the curriculum, and the details should be left to the professional judgement of teachers.

With this system, many schools suffering from severe socio-economic problems have managed to provide high-quality literacy education and produced good results. In Buranda Primary School of Brisbane, the curriculum has been reformed by Principal Lin Hinton since 1997, and teaching has been based on the concept of 'philosophy'. This does not mean teaching philosophy, but a pedagogical attempt to stimulate children's awareness of their diversity. Buranda is trying to develop students' literacy through daily activities of respecting other's values and opinions, and organizing dialogue with others creatively and reflectively.

Buranda Primary School is located in an area where the ratio of low socio-economic status children is relatively higher when compared with other regions within Brisbane, and includes facilities for African refugee children. Despite of such a background, Buranda has consistently produced results above the

national benchmark³⁾.

How will the National Curriculum be likely to affect schools currently managing to provide excellent literacy education? As previously described, the current framework includes a variety of approaches for improving literacy, and the National Curriculum itself is not likely to impose certain limitation to each school's teaching activities. However, the National Curriculum may have some practical influences on schools when combined with the national test implemented from 2008 (which measures literacy and numeracy of grade 3, 5, 7 and 9 students).

This national test confirms the places of children in each state when compared with the Commonwealth government standard, and aims to reflect the results of state government policies. However, the contents of the test consist of very simplified questions such as reading, writing, spelling and extracts of information. There are some disparities between the simplicity of the national test and the multiple approaches in the National Curriculum. The national test stimulated competitive attitudes among state governments, and each state government is currently attempting to increase the number of children who can perform above the national benchmark. Due to this reason, state governments are likely to formulate educational curriculum policies according to the National Curriculum. The National Curriculum—test-accountability system—will be strengthened if the educational system moves in such a direction. In fact, there is a proposal to include an outline of achievement standards, the evaluation and reporting of the results in addition to the contents of what should be learned for each grade (ACARA, 2009).

4. TOWARDS HIGH EQUITY AND HIGH QUALITY MODEL OF LITERACY EDUCATION

This paper has so far attempted to clarify the inconsistencies and problems associated with the realization of equity and quality in literacy education, by focusing on the national curriculum policy in Australia. This last section streamlines the issues raised up to this stage and lists further objectives for future research.

Basically, equity in literacy education is considered as the assurance of access to education based on children's social background and experience, and as a pedagogical practice to promote social participation for children. This understanding is recognized by the fact that policy documents repeatedly mention low SES children and emphasize the importance of those children acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for working in globalized economy.

The assurance of access is significant because the federal government does not treat improvements in literacy as a means of raising academic aptitude, but because it attempts to resolve the problem of social and cultural resource redistribution. The national curriculum, which was difficult to realize previously, is gaining more support because the global economic crisis is worsening and the national government now expects it to function as a system of redistribution.

This point is particularly insightful for the issues around literacy in Japan. PISA has been conducted three times until now, and the role of languages in the learning process has successfully captured attention. However, the concept of literacy, previously debated within the context of assuring social access and the realization of justice, has been downsized to methodologies of learning by the debates on the drop in the test achievement. Currently, Japanese children are situated in diverse socio-economic background. Considering these problems, it becomes necessary to develop a perspective connecting literacy issues to our social and political structures and awareness. Such a perspective does not link the improvements of literacy to the test score, but encompasses issues of how the curriculum deals with the poverty problem, or how literacy can

improve access to society.

On the other hand, the Australian national curriculum framework could also lead to the problem of strengthening the test-accountability system. In fact, the Australian national test is based on the social democratic politics of spotting schools where low scholastic ability is linked to class issues, and of allocating resources to such schools. It is not based on the neo-liberal idea of distributing more funding to schools with high scores. For example, *the National Partnership on Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities* project is being implemented by the joint effort of the Commonwealth and state governments. Under this program, state schools where the low literacy achievement is linked to socio-economic background are allocated more resources for improving staff resources and learning environments. Schools are expected to be held accountability for the results of this assistance.

The potential problem of a test-accountability system is that it could simplify the pedagogy regardless of whether it is based on neo-liberalism or social democracy. Therefore, what needs to be examined is to reconsider PISA or the current Australian social democratic education policy implementation from the perspective of securing children's access to social and political participation. Literacy education should be based on the results of this new analysis.

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Notes

- 1) Renamed and currently called the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority; ACARA.
- 2) In Australia, an organization called 'Curriculum Branch' is set up and given an autonomous authority within the process of creating Queensland's educational curriculum. The autonomous nature of this organization limits the direct involvement of the Queensland government in this area.
- 3) For example, grade 7 literacy (reading) was 528 points (average) for Queensland in comparison to the Buranda school's score of 571 points. Ninety-four percent of children have scored above the standard set by the Commonwealth government. (Reference provided by Principal Hinton of Buranda School on 16 th March 2009).

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要 約

本稿は、オーストラリアにおいて進められているナショナル・カリキュラムの構想を手がかりに、グローバリゼーション下におけるリテラシー教育の公正と質をめぐる諸問題を検討するものである。

本稿では、まず、近年のオーストラリアにおける政治的文脈の中で教育課程政策の動向を理解する。すなわち、行き過ぎた新自由主義的政策への反省から、社会民主主義的政策へと移行していること、またその背景にはグローバリゼーション下におけるトランスナショナルな学力観があることを明らかにした。次いで、現在進められているナショナル・カリキュラムの構想が、個々の学校の教育実践にどのように影響を与えるかについて考察した。そして最後に、公正で質の高いリテラシー教育に向けた検討課題として、どのように社会へのアクセスという観点から、「下に手厚い」教育実践の問い直しをはかる重要性を指摘した。

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