

**WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?
SITUATING HISTORY, CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND STUDIES
OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT AGAINST NEO-CONSERVATIVE
CRITIQUES OF CURRICULUM REFORM**

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Abstract

This paper explores some of debates about the nature and purpose of education in the social sciences in the Australian curriculum. It examines recent attempts in studies of society and environment and history curriculum to prepare students for global citizenship and responds to neo-conservative critiques that our "politically correct" curricula does not impart the "truth" about our "European" heritage. This paper argues that while the neo-conservative discourse makes claim to traditional views of knowledge and rationality, its discursive field does not address the broader questions of what sort of education our students require for the twenty-first century.

Key Words

Social Sciences, History Teaching, Curriculum, Globalisation, Citizenship Education, Cross-cultural Studies.

Introduction

Few would doubt that the next generation of Australians will inhabit ethnically diverse, complex, globally-linked communities. As General Peter Cosgrove noted recently, the past one hundred years have seen

the gradual transformation of Australia from an overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic, homogeneous population ... to one of the world's most multicultural societies. (Cosgrove, 2003: 23)

The changing nature of Australian society and its connectedness to the global community will provide many opportunities for young Australians. However, recent events such September 11, the war in Iraq, the Bali bombing and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami remind us that Australians must be prepared for an increasingly uncertain world. Education is one of the most effective means of preparing students for these local, regional and global challenges. Yet as Rizvi (2004: 157) reminds us, there is a lack of consensus on the implications of globalisation for education policy. In broad terms, globalisation describes the complex ways in which the lives of the world's people have become increasingly linked and new ways in which local and national communities relate to each other (Tikly, 2001). As Scholte (2000: 14)

observes, globalisation can represent increasing progress and prosperity whilst others associate this process with deprivation and doom.

Despite the complexities of globalisation and debates about education policy directions, there is agreement amongst key stakeholders that education has to prepare young Australians to deal with its manifestations. Through the Australian Education Council (AEC), ministers for education from all state and territory governments have sought to define the common aspirations of their various systems, aiming at a consensus on the role of schooling in dealing with the challenges of globalisation. The AEC's Adelaide Declaration of National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (1999) states that:

schooling should assist young people to contribute to Australia's social, cultural and economic development in local and global context. (MCEETYA, 1999: 2)

However, others are threatened by "the realities of new times" (Tudball, 2003: 2) and attempts by the education system to respond to local, regional and global realities via curriculum reform. Such reactivists look inward and argue that:

education provides a moral framework and a cultural context in which young Australians both define themselves and address the question: what constitutes the good life? (Donnelly, 2004: 6)

Critics such as Donnelly argue that the education system has been "undermined by a series of ideologically driven changes" (Donnelly, 2004: 16). In particular, the Key Learning Area (KLA), Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), has been targeted for critique and labelled "politically correct".

Such claims need to be interrogated for, as Kemmis (1990) reminds us, "debates about curriculum reform reveal the fundamental concerns, uncertainties and tensions which preoccupy nations and states as they struggle to adapt to changing circumstance" (Kemmis, 1990: 82).

This paper identifies four aspects of the neo-conservative critiques against SOSE (Bolt, 2000; Mason, 2000; Donnelly, 2004; Thomas, 2000). In doing so, it argues that such critiques are flawed in their assumptions and misrepresent the nature of the SOSE curriculum framework as a vehicle for preparing young Australians for the future. The first assumption makes claim to a rationality which assumes that students passively acquire knowledge by learning universal and fixed social truths. Second is the assumption that any curriculum which advocates critical inquiry and analysis undermines the well-being of society. A third assumption is that Australian culture and history is derivative of Great Britain and should remain so. The fourth assumption posits a passive view of citizenship, that is, it assumes students should be taught to maintain the status quo.

Such flawed assumptions ignore recent research on the benefits of metacognitive approaches to teaching and learning and do not prepare students for the complexities of the twenty-first century. They are evidenced in the following claims:

Whereas education was once based on the assumption that there are some absolutes (truth telling, equal justice for all and the need for tolerance and compassion) in the brave new world ... students are told that everything is tentative and shifting and that the purpose of education is to criticise. (Donnelly, 2004: 145)

The European settlement of Australia is described as an invasion and Australia's Anglo/Celtic heritage is either marginalised or ignored ... the syllabus fails to make any mention of Anglo/Celtic figures, such as Captain Cook, Matthew Flinders, Edmond Barton or Sir Robert Menzies, who have made this nation what it is today. (Donnelly, 2004: 134)

The syllabus is hostile to our society because it is based on the value of social justice where students seek to deconstruct dominant views of society ... This syllabus doesn't even pretend to hide its hostility to the traditional disciplines and knowledge which underpin the glory of Western culture ... (Bolt, 2000: 33)

The curriculum substitutes propaganda and indoctrination for basic knowledge. It teaches our children the wrong lessons about the past. It teaches our children to be morally blind. (Mason, 2000: 13)

Such neo-conservative discursive critiques on recent curriculum reform can be analysed from various theoretical perspectives. Before such contexts are explored it is necessary to situate the development of SOSE in the Australian curriculum.

The context for SOSE

In terms of framing a proactive world view, it could be argued that the aetiology of SOSE stems from earlier attempts to foster critical thinking and intellectually rigorous inquiry-based learning in the social sciences curriculum. The movement to foster critical thinking in the curriculum drew upon Habermas' (1971) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, which proposed that certain forms of knowledge could be empowering. In particular, critical knowledge (Kemmis, Cole & Suggett, 1987) and its focus on the ideological basis of phenomena, empowered people to take action and emancipate themselves from forms of oppression. This emphasis on empowering individuals through critical inquiry was emphasised in the work of the Social Educators' Association of Australia (SEAA), notably through two position papers (SEAA, 1984; 1990).

Neo-conservatives assert that critical thinking is destructive; that it is nothing more than negative thinking. Yet critical thinking is quite different from what they purport: it involves processes of investigation and a questioning of the advantages and disadvantages related to wide ranging phenomena, from human situations to beliefs and practices. The emphasis is on deciding what needs to be accepted and preserved, and what needs to be changed to improve a situation. Hence, critical thinking can have radical effects, when people decide to make worthwhile changes, but also conservative effects, when people decide to maintain what is valuable. Critical thinking is inextricably linked to human progress. For example, the Abolitionists challenged the taken-for-granted assumption that slavery was acceptable, the Suffragettes argued for women to have the right to vote and own property. At the time, slavery and women's disenfranchisement were accepted as part of the natural order and considered 'normal'. These practices were only challenged when they were questioned and critiqued.

The development of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) as an area of study in the Australian curriculum was prompted by the decision of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to identify Key Learning Areas (KLAs) for Australian schools during the 1990s. The SOSE KLA was defined in two

documents. The conceptual strands, inquiry processes, values and cross curricular perspectives were published as a curriculum statement (Australian Education Council 1994a). This statement was presented as a framework for school-based curriculum development and emphasised substantive, procedural and contextual knowledge. The SOSE learning outcomes were detailed in a curriculum profile (Australian Education Council 1994b). This outcome approach emphasised what students should know and do with what they know, and it was used to inform planning and provide a framework for assessment. Critics of the SOSE national statements and profiles, such as Donnelly, argued that they failed to

properly deal with subjects like history and geography ... History is not the only subject rewritten to make it PC [politically correct]. Geography has also been a key battleground in the left's attempts to impose its particular worldview on Australian students. (Donnelly, 2004: 134, 148)

Such criticism persisted, and was levelled at particular State and Territory versions of SOSE. Essentially, this discourse revolved around two narratives. The first was about the nature of knowledge and the second centred on what education is for. The SOSE KLA emphasised that knowledge should be empowering and that education should facilitate this. As Gilbert (2004: vi) put it SOSE “deals with questions that are central to the lives of students, but which are also among the most significant issues of our time”. Accordingly, the SOSE KLA endorsed the notion of active and informed citizenship as essential for participation in society. This approach to citizenship went beyond understanding and problem-solving and assumed that students will participate in the decision-making processes by using and applying their knowledge in social settings. This notion of critical social understanding and action based on values such as democracy, social justice and economic and ecological sustainability was challenging to traditional practice.

SOSE also endorsed the notion that curricula reflect aspects of Australian society and culture and that the study of such values is significant to understanding and participating in it. In intellectual terms, “it is impossible to engage with important ideas and issues without addressing the values which lie at the heart of many of them” (Gilbert & Hoeppe, 2004: 93). Rather than “teaching our children to be morally blind” (Mason, 2000: 13) and “indoctrinating our children into espousing left-wing values” (Courier Mail, 2000: 22), the SOSE KLA emphasised that values were to be critiqued and investigated, and that they were contestable. As Gilbert & Hoeppe (1996: 77–78) observed, values education should be approached,

as much like any other part of the curriculum. These are principles to be understood, applied and practiced...in an atmosphere of open and critical inquiry, students will not be forced to hold particular views, nor will they be afraid to discuss controversial issues.

One of the most innovative features of SOSE was its foregrounding of culture as an essential basis for understanding. Yet, the SOSE National Statement was criticised by neo-conservatives for not privileging an Anglo/Saxon culture.

The document also asks students to acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity without recognising that much of Australia's economic, political and legal stability relies on a European tradition steeped in the

Judeo/Christian ethic... Belittling Australia's Anglo/Celtic tradition ...
(Donnelly, 2004: 147)

Although the States and Territories agreed to the KLA proposal, there was contention about the ways in which it could be adopted. Accordingly, different versions of SOSE were developed by various States and Territories. Yet as Gilbert (2004: 15) noted,

all of them had clear connections to the original statement and the basic knowledge, process, skills and values elements of the key learning area still reflect their origin in the social science and humanities, and their emphasis on social and environmental understanding.

The SOSE Syllabus in Queensland

The Queensland School Curriculum Council's (QSCC) (2000) version of the SOSE KLA prompted much debate. An editorial in the state newspaper entitled, "Ideology in the classroom", condemned SOSE as "deeply unbalanced and often bizarre" arguing that "the curriculum pays scant attention to Australia's British heritage" (Courier Mail, 2000: 24).

It is argued here that rather than diminish the study of Australia's past in the curriculum, the emergence of SOSE as a core learning area has heightened history's place in schools at a time when the emphasis on historical studies was in decline. The concepts identified for the SOSE strand Time, Continuity and Change, namely: time, continuity, heritage, causation, motive and effect, are central to the study of history. Moreover, the SOSE emphasis on the process of critical inquiry shares many features of historical inquiry that have been central to history teaching since the late 1970s. As SOSE is a core part of the curriculum, Primary and Middle school teachers now have the opportunity to emphasise studies of Time, Continuity and Change and ensure that all students can engage in some form of historical inquiry.

Similarly, the Commonwealth History Project (CHP) emphasised the notion of Historical Literacies as central to historical studies in History and SOSE (Taylor & Young 2003), for it argued that "(h)istorical literacy was about social and political empowerment" (Taylor, 2004: 18). This can be seen in the 12-point index for historical literacies that included a range of significant understandings, concepts and skills. It can be argued that the conceptual strand of Time, Continuity and Change offers students the opportunity to engage in historical literacies by investigating past and present societies which are different from their own. Such investigations can encourage students to develop an empathy for others and to embrace diversity and difference in local, regional and global settings.

Thus far, this paper has argued that SOSE is significant in two ways. First, it provides a curriculum framework that endorses substantial, procedural and contextual knowledge together with perspectives from the social science disciplines and fields of study. Second, it emphasises that education should be empowering at two levels. At one level, SOSE provides opportunities for individual students to understand and participate in society and environment so they can achieve their potential as active and informed citizens. On a broader scale, SOSE explores what values about the social and environmental world people should consider, understand and respond to if all human beings are to lead satisfying, sustainable lives. This requires the development of "an open-mindedness to new thinking about the world and a predisposition to

active participation as a member of the global community building a shared future”. (Curriculum Corporation, 2002: 6)

Through processes of critical inquiry students can learn about themselves and about how others construct their views of the world. This cultural knowledge goes beyond the monolithic Anglo-Celtic cultural representations that neo-conservatives advocate. As Luke (Luke & Carpenter, 2003: 20) suggests, today’s students require a “tool kit” of knowledge and skills for “analysing, critiquing and engaging with the global flows of images, representation and text” that they encounter in their classrooms and in society. Yet according to recent neo-conservative critiques, SOSE is ideologically driven and flawed for not providing the sort of knowledge students require and “ought to be dumped for something less ideological and more in tune with what students need”. (Courier Mail, 2000: 24)

It is necessary to now analyse the nature and origins of such neo-conservative critiques from a theoretical perspective.

Theoretical perspectives

Rizvi’s (2004) adaptation of Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) notion of a cultural field is insightful in establishing the normative basis of neo-conservative claims about SOSE. Bourdieu depicted a cultural field as a changing system of institutions, practices, rules and interactions that authorise particular activities and discourses. Rizvi draws on this to conceptualise a “discursive field”, as a range of assumptions made implicitly in the debates about a specific issue or topic. That is, which ideas are presumed to have authority and which notions are considered inappropriate for discussion. As Rizvi posits

...the discursive field represents an exercise in power, establishing the universalised grounds upon which further questions are permissible and may be asked, defining the parameters of acceptable images, narratives, information, voices and perspectives (Rizvi, 2004: 162).

This paper argues that neo-conservative critiques preclude a proactive response to the challenges of local, regional and global engagement and draw upon a range of assumptions about the nature and purpose of knowledge and curriculum orientations which are part of a “traditional approach” (Cope, 1986; Cope and Kalantzis, 1990) to debates in the social sciences curriculum. The so-called “traditional” approach advocates a centrally prescribed curriculum based on declarative knowledge. As Gilbert (2003:11) observed of this approach, “social values are seen to be universal and absolute and derived from perennial ideals; and knowledge is seen to comprise a series of fixed social truths”. This approach assumes that knowledge can be transmitted to students via uncritical instruction and values inculcation. This framing of knowledge, and in particular history, can be observed in Donnelly’s critique of Time, Continuity and Change in the SOSE curriculum.

Instead of learning about Australia’s Anglo/Celtic culture and the growth of Western civilisation in this country since 1788, teachers are made to give priority to a feminist, multicultural and neo-Marxist interpretation of history. (Donnelly, 2004: 59)

In framing universal values and fixed social absolutes, the traditionalist approach, and more recent neo-conservative discursive fields, deny the possibility of alternate perspectives. At best, they regard different perspectives as misguided or aberrant

views that need to be rectified. At worst, neo-conservatives, such as Donnelly and Bolt, claim that the perspectives informing the SOSE syllabus “are hostile to our society because [different views are based] on the value of social justice where students seek to deconstruct dominant views of society” (Bolt, 2000: 33). As noted earlier, this misconstrues the nature and purpose of critical inquiry, and misrepresents the ways in which the SOSE syllabus approaches the study of values.

In essence, the neo-conservative discursive field privileges its claims in the “rationality” of tradition, whilst assuming the authority to dismiss alternative views. Accordingly, this paper now situates the epistemological origins of such traditional assumptions about “rationality” in eighteenth century Enlightenment notions of knowledge, then it positions such notions of knowledge in relation to the curriculum. The notion that knowledge contributed to human rationality, which in turn facilitated progress, was enshrined by eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, notably in the application of scientific thought to secular life. And it was the relationship between Enlightenment assumptions and the particular social, political, cultural and economic conditions of the time that prompted what Habermas (1987: 3) termed the Western intellectual “project” of modernity.

Modernity carried with it assumptions of achievement and optimism and was founded on the belief that humans could control their environment through positivist and rationalist perspectives. The Enlightenment premise, that the application of particular forms of knowledge within a rationalist perspective facilitates human progress, is the intellectual context for the development of traditional approaches to the curriculum and recent neo-conservative frames of reference.

Whilst Enlightenment philosophers’ assumptions about the nature of rational knowledge were later subjected to a range of critiques, it is important to focus on those aspects of the critique which relate directly to the construction of knowledge about non-Europeans. This is an ontological issue, as Theunissen (1984: 1) observed

few issues have expressed as powerful a hold over the thought of this century as that of “The Other”...it is difficult to think of a second theme that so sharply marks off the present – admittedly a present growing out of the nineteenth century and reaching back to it – from its historical roots in the tradition.

Moreover, the importance of acquiring knowledge about the non-European parts of the world, that is, engaging in the process of developing knowledge of “others”, may also be seen as one of the most compelling responses to the forces of globalisation.

Four connected parts of the problem of knowing the “other” at this level of analysis have significance for the debates about the sort of SOSE curriculum young Australians should encounter and how they might acquire knowledge for local, regional and global engagement. The first indicates that claims for the universality and rationality of Western knowledge were flawed. The second suggests that Eurocentrism filtered Western knowledge and values, while the third points to the relationship between power and knowledge and how this privileged particular forms of knowledge and the discursive fields that draw upon them. The fourth extends the preceding three perspectives to demonstrate that forms of knowledge in the Australian education system were premised on some of the flawed assumptions of the European

Enlightenment. Collectively, these arguments expose the biased nature of neoconservative responses.

First, the technological advances which accompanied the Enlightenment laid the groundwork for the further acquisition of colonies and the development of European imperialism. This nexus between imperial practices and the Enlightenment assumption of rational knowledge was, for some, another stage in the processes whereby Western philosophy reduced “the other” and absorbed it as “the same” (Levinas, 1969: 36). Bernstein has argued (1991) that this critique of the philosophic assumptions of Enlightenment rationality has become one of the major themes of contemporary philosophy. In this view, Western reason

when unmasked – is understood as always seeking to appropriate, comprehend, control, master, contain, dominate, suppress, or repress what presents itself as “the Other” that it confronts. It is the theme of Reason’s imperialistic embrace (Bernstein, 1991: 71).

And, as Young (1990) reminds us, there was in this a significant link between forms of knowledge, particular historical settings and emergent practices. It might be argued that the philosophic assumptions of this period were unable to conceive a world view which did not reflect Western notions of rationality. Thus, neo-conservative critiques of education reform derived from this philosophic tradition prevented a more critical, nuanced view of what sort of knowledge Australian students require for the twenty first century.

Related to this is the second aspect of knowing others. One of the dominant metanarratives in which knowledge of others was constructed during the Enlightenment was an historicism that celebrated the linear progress of mankind and the triumph of capitalist endeavour. Liberal, progressive or “Whig” histories usually chart the application of rationality and the rule of law to the conduct of public life whilst detailing technological and economic developments concomitant with the progress of individual freedom and democracy. Whig historians typically construct a narrative with the theme of progress plotted through key events and they often focus on the achievements of powerful figures and nations. Neo-conservative discursive fields draw upon this notion of history, as can be seen in Donnelly’s comments about the framing of history in the SOSE syllabus:

As a result of this politically correct approach to history teaching, not only are students taught that any version of the past is subjective and relative, but history is also reduced to a series of fragments or moments in opposition to what traditional history teaching termed the grand narrative. Students are no longer given a broad, chronologically-based historical perspective ... (Donnelly, 2004: 58).

Donnelly’s position reflects a view in which the grand narratives of “Eurocentrism” “legitimately” triumphed in European civilisation and suppressed or silenced the histories and cultures of non-Western peoples. Chakrabarty (1992) emphasised the irony of Western imperial rationality for those who were forced to experience it as colonised peoples.

Eurocentric intellectuals often forget ... that to make someone a citizen is over the long term a process that involves violence and coercion, that to

civilise is at the same time to colonise, and that somebody is always hurt on the way (Chakrabarty, 1992: 108).

Critics of the Enlightenment legacy, such as Chakrabarty (1992: 108), have called for a rereading of the European philosophers of modernity in order “to show up the parochialism of their imagination”. Further, Chakrabarty warned of the ways in which this particular empiric “usurps” non-Westerners, and argued that the history of modernity “may be of necessity a history of constant betrayal of its central propositions” (Chakrabarty, 1992: 108). These powerful arguments raise questions about neo-conservative critiques that valorise colonial and imperial histories and criticise the place of history in the SOSE curriculum because it interrogates the excesses of imperial and colonial rule.

Since the release of SOSE ... how students are taught Australian history and politics has also become a battleground of the PC movement. As noted by Professor Geoffrey Blainey, many historians and textbooks promote a ‘black armband’ view of Australia’s past and world affairs. Blainey’s argument is that Australian history is being interpreted in a particularly negative way; instead of celebrating what we have achieved as a nation, students are taught to feel guilty about the sins of the past ... (Donnelly, 2004: 133)

The third feature of the critical responses to the Enlightenment legacy for the construction of knowledge about non-Europeans, is the issue of the relationship between knowledge and power. This connection between knowledge and power in relation to curriculum reform can be illuminated further by Foucault’s (1979) notion of discursive practices. The links between Foucault’s notion of power, knowledge and emergent discourses was taken up by other writers to critique those Western imperial practices that accompanied the Enlightenment and the subsequent “knowledge” of others. It was argued that imperialism operated not only through the forces of the imperial state but also through the discourses of Western philosophy, history, anthropology, philology, linguistics and literary interpretation. In particular, Said (1978/1991) adapted Foucault’s contention that the construction of knowledge in discursive fields created a representation of the object of knowledge. In this way Said worked to demonstrate that the “Orient” was constructed in Western terms for Western appropriation. Said’s work opened the door to the epistemological debates about knowing “others” in Australia, and elsewhere. As Salusinszky observed (1987: 125)

(t)he truly unsettling thing about Said’s study, as far as its scholarly audience is concerned, is its demonstration of the way in which European Oriental scholarship, including that of our own century, has been a central part of this appropriation, rather than a descriptive account of it.

The fourth part of the problem of knowing the “other” relates to the preceding critique and concerns the kind of knowledge about non-Europeans possible in the Australian education system. Until recently, Australian knowledge about the non-European world, notably Asia, was based upon modernist notions of the European Enlightenment. This reflected Australia’s recent history as an outpost of the British Empire and can be seen in the formative influences of British and European traditions on Australian political and cultural life. Rizvi (1993: 23) argued that

...(i)t is within a colonial framework that White Australia has sought to understand its relations not only with its indigenous populations but also with the outside world ... it has been the dominant European ideas that have informed Australian discourses about Asia.

Critics of the European tradition in education argued that it established the groundwork for epistemological practices that marginalised the representation of non-European cultures in the school curriculum. At the level of the classroom, it meant that until most recently, Australian school children developed a Eurocentric, if not Anglocentric, view of the world. Indeed, the last national review of the range of curricula offered in Australian schools in 1991 revealed an overwhelming emphasis on European philosophical traditions as they were represented in discipline-based subjects (Australian Education Council, 1991). Moreover, this paper contends that the neo-conservative discursive field continues to draw upon this framework to critique current curriculum reforms.

Critiques of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the Enlightenment notion of rational knowledge demonstrate that European efforts to acquire knowledge about “others” were highly problematical. Since British and European cultural referents were the filters through which many Australians acquired such knowledge about Asia, then the forms and uses of such knowledge was also problematic. This, in turn, prompts questions about the relationship between forms of knowledge and cultural representation. The question is raised: how do we make judgements about what constitutes culture? This leads to a further question: how do we understand the cultures of others? Said (1978/1991: 325–326) asked:

(h)ow does one represent another culture? What is another culture ... Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, “normality”, and even the status of “natural” truth?

It has been claimed that analytic paradigms from the 1940s and 1950s took no account of cultural understandings of the non-Western world, and this meant that Australian academics came to terms with the nations of Asia, for example, with “the only tools we had, which meant applying Western categories to the Asian situation” (Legge cited in Rudd, 1995: 29).

This paper argues that the SOSE curriculum emphasis on culture as a basis for understanding has a dual benefit. First, the intellectual features of cultural understanding (cross-cultural understanding) are necessary for Australians to engage in local, regional and global contexts. Second, this emphasis facilitates broader understandings of how Australians view themselves and “others”. As Milner (1996:11) noted:

Differences between societies in the [Asian] region need to be appreciated; so must the dynamism and complexity of value systems, and the way they are constituted. But in this process of comparison and analysis – a process that will be engaged in as much by business people, bureaucrats and tourists as by academics – the focus on Australia as 'other' will sharpen Australia's self-perceptions. Values and concepts that Australians so often take for granted will draw attention to themselves in

this comparative context. We will be able to recognise instances in which they have achieved dominance in Australian society as “core values”.

However, neo-conservatives continue to oppose any questioning of the values and concepts that Australians so often take for granted, and denigrate the SOSE syllabus for advocating this approach. Instead, neo-conservative discourses advocate an Anglo-centric world view. Donnelly (2004), for example, makes claim to knowing the history and culture of Australia and condemns curriculum attempts that do not replicate his view. On a broader scale, such hegemonic discourses privilege a divisive history that holds to a static notion of culture and a binary opposite notion of civilization. Huntington (1994) advocated a related notion in his treatise, where he argued that the world could be divided into two culturally distinct, religious and cultural blocs. This view of the world effectively “closed off” cultures from one another. As Said (2001) observed, Huntington’s thesis denied the historical and contemporary interactions and exchanges between cultures. Moreover, it did not accept that cultures respond to change and express change.

This paper argues that neo-conservative critiques of SOSE effectively “close students off” from learning about the local, regional and global realities that face Australia. Our region includes the greatest diversity of belief systems in any part of the world; 60 per cent of the world’s population; 25 per cent of global GDP; two of the world’s most populous nations – India and China – and two of the world’s global superpowers – China and Japan. Such regional and global realities indicate that we “have” to provide opportunities for students to go beyond the hegemonic world view of the neo-conservatives.

Moving forward

As Gilbert (2003: 13) reminds us, the nature of SOSE remains controversial for those who oppose change, for to “promote a critical approach to contemporary social arrangements ... rather than prescriptions to be followed is to invite criticism ...”

While there is much anecdotal confirmation that SOSE has been successfully implemented in many classrooms, social educators need to provide empirical evidence of the benefits of this approach. In this regard, this paper is also a call for sustained research on the implementation of many facets of the SOSE KLA. Such research will provide the most proactive response to neo-conservative critiques.

Conclusion

This paper argues that recent neo-conservative critiques of SOSE are unfounded. It utilises specific theoretical perspectives to demonstrate that these critiques are linked to traditional assumptions about knowledge that are not appropriate to the ethnically diverse, complex, globally-linked communities that young Australians will inhabit.

Although there are few absolutes in a globalised world, it is argued here that preparing young Australians to engage with increasing cultural diversity and to develop the capacity to think critically about the global flows of representations they encounter in the different facets of their lives *is* educationally appropriate. This provides a basis for global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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