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Positioning the Arts in the Australian National Curriculum

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Biography

Sandra Gattenhof is a senior lecturer in drama and contemporary performance in the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. Sandra has been chair and board member of a number of international, national and Brisbane-based arts, drama and youth arts companies. She has also been an arts education consultant to La Boite Theatre Company and Brisbane Festival. She is immediate past-president of Drama Australia, past-president of Drama Queensland and past Queensland board member of Young People and the Arts Australia. Sandra is a Drama Australia Board member in the role of Director of Arts Education and Industry Partnerships and is Drama Australia's representative on National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE).

Introduction

In 2008 the Australian Government embarked on the development of a National Curriculum. To date, announcements about development of learning areas in Phase 1 (English, mathematics, science and history) and Phase 2 (geography and languages) have been released. But where are the arts positioned? This article traces the advocacy strategy employed by Drama Australia and the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE) in the fight for the arts to be included in National Curriculum Board (NCB) timeline for development, trial and implementation.

This story is not a new one. It seems like every ten years or so the arts have had to fight for inclusion in the development of curricula in Australia and within Australian state and territories. However if we are to believe a statement jointly made by Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) then one could presume that the battle has been won and put to bed. The statement reads:

All children and young people should have a high quality arts education in every phase of learning. (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and Cultural Ministers Council, 2007, 5).

In reality, the battle for the inclusion of the arts (dance, drama, media, music and visual art& design) to gain a rightful place in the development of a national curriculum for Australian schools has only just begun. One of the earliest battle strategies was the expressed need to work from a position of strength. That is, to work as a united voice for the arts, rather than trying to work from an individual art form base. Very quickly each of the art form associations regrouped under the banner of National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE).

Who are the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE)?

NAAE is not a new body. "The National Affiliation of Arts Educators (NAAE) Inc was established in 1989 with the support of the Joint Council of Cultural and Education Ministers. It has a long history of working with government being instrumental in ensuring that the Arts were established as one of the eight key learning areas in the Australian curriculum" (NAAE website). This group had significant carriage of the consultation and writing of the 1992 *The arts – a statement on the arts for Australian schools* and the companion document *The arts – a curriculum profile for Australian schools*.

The NAAE represents Australians concerned with Dance, Drama, Music and Visual Arts education. These associations include: Drama Australia, Ausdance, Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM), Music Council of Australia (MCA), Art Education Australia, National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) and Australian Society for Music Education (ASME).

Membership of these associations includes teachers at all levels of schooling, in tertiary institutions, community programs and private studios and practices. In its advocacy role, NAAE brings together not only teachers in each art form but also practising artists and members of the arts industry.

NAAE advocates for arts education in both institutional and community settings, develops arts education policy, and promotes quality teaching and learning in the arts. As the recognised peak association in the arts learning area, the NAAE provides access to an extensive network of arts educators and artists, and represents the interests, concerns, values and priorities of arts educators in Australia (NAAE website).

For a number of years NAAE had become a sleeper organization. In 2006 NAAE became active again holding its first face-to-face meeting and then subsequently an AGM. It was agreed at the NAAE AGM that the organization would dis-incorporate, for financial reasons, but that associations joined together under the banner of NAAE would remain committed to the ethos of NAAE and would communicate by email and when necessary teleconference. The one of the first teleconferences occurred in August 2008 in response to the announcement of

the disciplines targeted for inclusion in the national curriculum. The arts were not included.

In October 2008 representatives of artform associations, who were historical members of NAAE, met to discuss the NCB announcement talk to other like-minded groups such as Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) and plan a strategy to position the arts within the national curriculum remit.

At the October 2008 meeting NAAE modified its nomenclature from *alliance to advocates* to reflect the re-invigoration of the group and its focus of action – advocating for the position of the arts as a learning area in the remit of the National Curriculum Board.

NAAE believe that our individual art forms must be properly resourced within the curriculum, but have common concerns about:

- the lack of mandated representation of the arts within the curriculum K to 10;
- inadequate pre-and in-service teacher education and professional development in the arts;
- the lack of adequate arts resources, teaching standards and research (NAAE, 2009a).

Within national education forums there is widespread support for the inclusion of the arts as a learning area in the National Curriculum. The *National Education and the Arts Statement* (2007) jointly released by the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) and the Ministerial Council for Education Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) clearly stated:

The arts foster imagination, risk-taking and curiosity—important aspects of creativity. Governments, businesses and communities now widely regard creativity and innovation as fundamental to social, economic, cultural and technological growth.

We now need to mobilise our arts and education systems to reap the full benefits of creativity in our lives as individuals and communities, making us a creative and innovative nation.

Individuals' creative skills and capacities are nurtured through a balanced and dynamic education rich in arts and cultural experiences. Every child deserves such an education, with carefully planned opportunities to learn in and through the arts. Education systems that value and develop individuals' creative capacities help to position Australia as a vibrant nation in the global context.

A growing body of international and Australian research demonstrates the multiple benefits of an arts-rich education from an early age. Over and above the obvious development of individual creativity and self-expression, school-based arts participation can increase learners' confidence and motivation, thereby improving school attendance rates, academic outcomes and the wellbeing and life skills of children and young people ((Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and Cultural Ministers Council, 2007, 4).

These are heady statements. Again, one would believe that if arts and education ministers, at both Federal and state/territory level, sign off in agreement on these statements then the arts would automatically be included in any development of national curriculum.

The NAAE Strategy

In October of 2008 NAAE members met in Sydney to formulate a strategy for action. It was decided at this meeting that the key strategy was to lobby and talk direct to Government¹. The reason for doing this was to leverage influence of all remits of the NCB. Both the scope of the NCB brief and appointments to the NCB are the providence of Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard's office that includes the portfolios of education, productivity and social inclusion. Post the October meeting of NAAE Julie Dyson, NAAE Chair, spent a considerable amount of time crafting letters requesting meetings with targeted Ministers and advisors to discuss the decision of the Arts non-inclusion in either Phase 1 (English, mathematics, science, history) or Phase 2 (geography and languages); and to request for the Arts to be positioned in the landscape of the national curriculum.

NAAE were successful in gaining meetings with Minister Peter Garrett (Minister for The Arts), Minister Julia Gillard's education advisor, Minister Kim Carr's education advisor (as Kim Carr represents Julia Gillard's education interests in the Senate), and representatives from Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

Prior to meeting Ministers and advisors in Canberra NAAE members collaboratively wrote a two-page Executive Summary paper² for distribution. At the conclusion of the paper NAAE made three strong recommendations to Government:

National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE) recommend that the following immediate action be taken:

¹ Australian Federal Government.

² A full copy of the NAAE Briefing paper (2008) is available from http://www.ausdance.org.au/professional_practice/naae.html

1. The Federal Government to schedule the inclusion of the arts as a learning area in the development of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Curriculum in Phase 2.
2. When included in the National curriculum each art form (i.e. dance, drama, music and visual arts) maintain its integrity and be taught sequentially.
3. The Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs matches the \$40,000 committed by Cultural Ministers Council (2 October 2008) to develop a framework for a national curriculum for the arts (NAAE, 2008, 2).

NAAE were also conscious that the national curriculum did not include the early years education (birth to 8 years) and immediately decided to broaden the scope of the advocacy strategy to include the Early Years Learning Framework. Whilst acknowledging the importance of play in the overall development of young children the framework did not explicitly make arguments for the arts in the early childhood years. Jeff Meiners, an Ausdance representative on NAAE, clearly articulated the issue. "Unless the arts are mandated in this way, resources will undoubtedly continue to be reduced in an essential area of learning at a vital time of childhood development" (Meiners, 2008). NAAE lobbied Robyn Cooper chair of the Early Years Learning Framework and the arts are now clearly embedded in the Framework.

Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

On 5 December 2008, State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, released the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians which sets the direction for Australian schooling for the next ten years. Contained in this document was the first real glimmer of hope that the Arts have a place in the development of national curriculum.

Throughout the Melbourne Declaration there are a number of statements around notions of young Australians being engaged in curriculum and educational experiences that promote creativity, innovation, cultural appreciation and personal values. This stance is most clearly demonstrated in *Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens*.

Under the heading of *Successful learners* an enabling statement is included: "Successful learners... are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines" (MCEETYA, 2009, 8). The document goes on to address *Confident and creative individuals* as being those that "are enterprising, show initiative and use their creative abilities" and *Active and informed citizens* that "appreciate Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and have an understanding of Australia's system of governments, history and culture" (MCEETYA, 2009, 9). All these outcomes can be achieved through engagement

in, through and about dance, drama, media, music and visual art. The document also contains a section titled *Commitment to Action*. It is in this section under the heading of *Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment* that the Arts are positioned as valid learning areas.

The curriculum will enable students to develop knowledge in the disciplines of English, mathematics, science, languages, humanities and the arts, to understand the spiritual, moral and *aesthetic* [my emphasis] dimensions of life; and open up new ways of thinking (MCEETYA, 2009, 13).

The Declaration then expands upon this statement by saying;

The learning areas are not of equal importance at all year levels. English and mathematics are of fundamental importance in all years of schooling and are the primary focus of learning in the early years. ...Each learning area has a specific discipline base and each has application across the curriculum (MCEETYA, 2009, 14).

Arts educators do not dispute the statement above. The disciplines clustered under the banner of the Arts as having their own literacy and coding/decoding systems to be taught and understood. Margaret Seares, former Chair of the Australia Council and now Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor at The University of Western Australia supports this view by saying;

There's a whole raft of children missing out on something that can change their lives. We would be failing our children if we didn't have a national curriculum that looked after literacy, numeracy and languages, but it's also a failing if we don't look after the arts as well. (Seares in Perkin, 2009).

The Declaration then lists the learning areas for development and finally the words **the arts (performing and visual)** appear. A glimmer of longed for hope.

Outcomes to Date: the unfinished story

In February 2009 NAAE received a written response to the request to include the Arts in the national curriculum. NCB Chair, Barry McGaw stated that "MCEETYA determines the coverage of national curriculum and hence if and when arts will be included in national curriculum" (McGaw, 2009). From this response the line of action for NAAE was clear. Somehow the debate needed to be taken to MCEETYA as the body that drives the national curriculum agenda. The relationship between the development of disciplines in the national curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration seem, at face value, to be closely aligned. NAAE sought clarification about this dialogue and were told;

The Melbourne Declaration provides the national curriculum with a framework, with an additional list for learning areas going forward to MCEETYA for approval at the mid-year meeting. MCEETYA will then meet in October and Minister Julia Gillard expects an indication of a timeline for delivery of the additional learning areas. The Melbourne Declaration can be seen to be an enabling document, but not a clarifying one (NAAE, 2009b).

Again, it was clear MCEETYA was the key. NAAE held a meeting with Robert Randall, General Manager of NCB, at his request in April of this year. Almost at the same time of this meeting NAAE were advised that Minister Peter Garrett would be addressing MCEETYA at the April meeting about the importance of arts education and arguing for the arts to be included in Phase 2. Minister Garrett's advisor called upon NAAE to suggest documents that might be used to construct the argument for how the arts contribute to a better-educated society with productive citizens. Another little chink of hope. A Federal minister had taken up the cause.

Since late last year federal Arts Minister Peter Garrett has been discussing the arts' inclusion in the curriculum debate with Education Minister Julia Gillard. Garrett's unprecedented invitation to address [the MCEETYA meeting on April 17 2009] is a crucial next step in presenting the idea to the ministers in charge of driving curriculum reform (Perkin, 2009).

The meeting with Robert Randall was a very productive discussion that resulted in Randall making two break-through statements for the arts:

1. He would recommend to Barry McGaw and members of NCB that NAAE be the consultative group to work with and through in the any development of a national curriculum in the arts;
2. He suggested that NAAE meet with him in June for a one-day workshop to begin the process of looking at issues for the framing of a national arts curriculum.

NAAE agreed to undertake an audit to find commonalities and difference in arts curricula in Australian states and territories in an effort to establish justification for why certain arts-based knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes are in curricula structures. This audit would be the basis to begin the discussion of essential learnings in a national arts curriculum. This audit is timetabled for completion by the end of May 2008 in preparation for the June meeting with Robert Randall.

Although the meeting with Robert Randall was extremely positive and knowing that Minister Garrett's address to MCEETYA was imminent NAAE continue to lobby. Garrett believes his address is "a unique opportunity for a commonwealth

arts minister to be able to present to MCEETYA, especially given the important issue of the next phase of the national curriculum they will be determining” (Garrett in Perkin, 2009).

On the afternoon of Friday 17 April, the day that Minister Garrett addressed MCEETYA, NAAE received confirmation that the arts had been added to Phase 2. The campaign had been successful. In a media release that afternoon Minister Garrett said:

Creativity, interpretation, innovation and cultural understanding are all sought after skills for new and emerging industries of the 21st century. Arts education provides students with the tools to develop these skills. ... Including arts on the national curriculum also ensures that training for teachers is prioritised. This means greater opportunities for teachers to expand and update their arts skills and knowledge and also ensures students receive high quality instruction. ... The Government is committed to providing students with a world-class, rigorous national curriculum from kindergarten to year 12 (Garrett in Pratt, 2009).

NAAE didn't think, when we started to meet last August, that we would get so far so quickly, especially after being told Phase 2 was finished, and there would be no Phase 3. Just proves we can never take no for an answer!

At the point of writing NAAE have since had a second consultative meeting with Rob Randall from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA³) and a senior project officer for the arts has been appointed. NAAE, having been successful in lobbying for the inclusion of the arts as a learning area in the National Curriculum for Australian Schools, now moves into a consultative phase. Viva l'Arts!

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³ National Curriculum Board became ACARA in May 2009.

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