

Outdoor education and the national curriculum in Australia.

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Abstract

Australia is in the midst of an education revolution driven by federal government reform. The centrepiece to that reform is a national curriculum that will wrest power from state education authorities and ultimately see a nationalised education process that determines what is taught and learned in all Australian schools. At present, outdoor education is not a subject in all state curricula and so stands to be disempowered by the channelling of resources into a national agenda. In this paper I describe the strategic directions taken by Outdoor Education Australia in an attempt to position outdoor education as a subject with distinctive contributions to make to a national curriculum in Australia. The national curriculum submission was framed around the distinctiveness of outdoor education in promoting a connection to nature, a capacity for critical thinking about human nature relationships leading to ecological literacy and the importance of teaching young Australians how to assess and manage personal risks. It acknowledged also the role of outdoor education in personal and group development, while accepting such outcomes were not unique in schooling. The veracity of the claims made is contestable and highlights the need for ongoing research that is both targeted and co-ordinated. This paper also invites response to the question of whether a professional consensus on the distinctiveness of outdoor education in schooling is a worthy goal.

Introduction

When the Labor government came to power in Australia in 2007 it replaced the conservative government that had held sway for over a decade. A trumpeted 'education revolution' was a key policy platform of this new centre-left Labor party. In the years following the election the Australian government has moved to implement a national curriculum from kindergarten to year 12 as one of the centrepieces of this education revolution. The national curriculum will ultimately replace the various current State based versions. The national curriculum is being developed to guide classroom teachers. It aims to "make clear to teachers what is to be taught, and to students what they should learn and what achievement standards expected of them" (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 8). The national curriculum will therefore have a significant impact on what teachers teach and what students experience in the Australian education system.

A national curriculum is a significant shift of curriculum determination power from the current State based educational authorities. It has potential to fundamentally change how outdoor education is taught in Australian schools, particularly in secondary schools. Whether outdoor education continues to exist in schools may well be a result of how clearly the outdoor education profession is able to build a case in support of its outcomes.

The national curriculum is being implemented in three phases (ACARA, 2010). Phase one, to be completed by the end of 2010, includes K-12 curriculum in English, mathematics, the sciences and

history, although how the recent federal election and a resultant hung parliament may impact on this is uncertain. Phase two adds the arts, geography and languages other than English. The final phase is yet to be fully specified, but will at least include physical education and sport (MCEECDYA, 2010). The question for outdoor educators is therefore quite simple, is there room for the outcomes of outdoor education in a nationally driven education curricula?

Outdoor education is currently a subject in several states of Australia. As a subject it's most common occurrence is in senior secondary education where specific and sometimes unique content has been blended to complement other school offerings. However, as described in an earlier edition of this journal:

Outdoor education has developed in schools from local initiatives and state-based lobbying. This results in different conceptions and practices of outdoor education in the different states and territories of Australia. (Martin, 2008a, p. 13)

The resultant differing conceptions and practices of outdoor education across Australia impedes the capacity for outdoor education to argue for a place in a national curriculum, quite simply because it's local idiosyncrasies often need interpretation by those who are its advocates, let alone anyone more distant charged with vetting such inclusions. If outdoor education is to exist on the national stage, State interpretations need to blend to develop a distinctive national consensus. *Outdoor Education Australia*, with funding support from the not-for-profit *Outdoor*

Education Group, has endorsed a bid to have outdoor education included as a distinctive discipline in the third phase of the national curriculum. In this paper, I outline the directions taken in this bid to include outdoor education in the national curriculum – the results of which remain inconclusive.

Why bother?

It's reasonable to ask if there is anything to be gained by attempting to include outdoor education in the third phase of the national curriculum project. For many teachers outdoor education is a not a discrete subject. Rather, outdoor education has a long tradition as being "a means of approaching certain educational objective through guided, direct experience in the out-of-doors" (The Curriculum Council, 1981, p. 11). The national curriculum policy statements acknowledge that not all education can be encapsulated within disciplinary boundaries.

Not all learning is contained in the learning areas into which the school curriculum has traditionally been divided. Reflections on the nature of work in the 21st century typically identify important general capabilities, and many people argue that schools should help students develop them.... including planning and organising, the ability to think flexibly, to communicate well and to work in teams ... the capacity to think creatively, innovate, solve problems and engage with new disciplines. (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 11)

It may be that outdoor education can contribute well to the development of these general capabilities in students. Promoting outdoor education as a process for achieving general capabilities remains a future strategic direction, especially if the current bid to recognise outdoor education as a subject fails. However, despite recognising not all learning occurs within traditional disciplines, at present it's proposed that the national curriculum will address general capabilities *within* a disciplinary framework. "Each capability will be represented in each learning area in ways appropriate to that area" (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 12) In short, disciplines are set to remain the de-facto unifying central pillar of curriculum design. It seems unlikely therefore that outdoor education will have much chance of inclusion in the national curriculum if it aligns itself with general capabilities, yet disciplines remain central. Certainly, experiential teaching methodology will remain an option for schools to include some outdoor education type experiences, but long argued educational claims from deliberate outdoor education seems destined to occur only incidentally under a discipline based framework that excludes

outdoor education as a subject. It's worth noting in passing, that curriculum built around disciplinary pillars has been linked to inhibiting learners from seeing knowledge contextually, an outcome cited as unhelpful for environmental education (Smyth, 2005).

There remains the possibility that outdoor education, particularly at the senior secondary level, can continue to be offered outside the national framework. It is the intention of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the body charged with implementing the national curriculum reform, that "Where a course is developed nationally that covers the scope of learning in existing state or territory courses, states and territories will cease to offer the existing courses. [However,] States and territories will continue to offer other courses that complement the nationally developed courses" (ACARA, 2009, p. 9). What remains problematic however, is the level of support and ultimately funding and acceptance that such state based subjects will continue to receive. There is evidence from the United Kingdom that subjects that were embraced by the national curriculum process prospered, while others were marginalised.

In the face of these options the board of Outdoor Education Australia (OEA) agreed that advocacy for outdoor education as a national level subject in its own right seemed appropriate. This was endorsed by delegates at the 16th National Outdoor Education Conference in Freemantle in January, 2010.

Outdoor educators don't seem to have a history of political astuteness and national advocacy. When the OEA agreed to support a bid for outdoor education in the national curriculum, key federal education position papers had already been written, public consultation periods had already closed and no outdoor education submissions had been received, making the chances of success far less likely. In a report to OEA summarising progress on the national curriculum project Anthony Hewison was to later write.

There is no doubt that the present situation has come about because the Outdoor Education profession has failed to organize itself properly and because there has been insufficient awareness of Outdoor Education as part of education as a whole, and therefore little awareness of wider developments in education and in government policy, which might affect Outdoor Education. (A. Hewison, personal communication, December, 11th, 2009)

Ultimately, if nothing else is gained from the process of advocating for outdoor education nationally, the profession in Australia will have

learned a hard lesson in the need for more astute national leadership and informed political awareness. Bringing this history to light is another reason for this paper.

Mounting a case for outdoor education in the national curriculum

Despite a low probability of success a small team worked to ensure members of the ACRA board, senior curriculum staff, key political figures and other central players learned about outdoor education as a subject¹.

As various historians of outdoor education have noted, the role that outdoor education plays, the niche it fills, and how it is funded is significantly influenced by political climate (Allison & Telford, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Nichol, 2002). If the push to have outdoor education included as a subject in the national curriculum was to have any chance of success in Australia it had to respond directly to the educational climate that underscored the government's education revolution.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians outlined the goals, policies and principles guiding a national curriculum. It contained eight learning areas within which the subjects of the national curriculum were to be developed. One of these learning areas was Health and Physical Education (HPE). The declaration also made reference to how "a focus on environmental sustainability will be integrated across the curriculum and all students will have the opportunity to access Indigenous content where relevant" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 14). The Shape of the Australian Curriculum followed in 2009 (National Curriculum Board, 2009) and it is this document that more closely specified how the national curriculum would be shaped and implemented.

Under the banner of OEA, Tony Hewison with assistance from others, compiled three papers supporting outdoor education's case for inclusion in the national curriculum. In the final paper, Hewison and this author were concerned with the outcomes of outdoor education and sought to position outdoor education as separate and distinctively different to physical education. We saw this as an important step. Outdoor educators would argue that physical education and outdoor education differ. This difference it seems, is less acknowledged by teachers of physical education, and potentially those deliberating on the inclusion of subjects in a national curriculum.

1. Tony Hewison led the advocacy of outdoor education. Tony was not an outdoor educator, his work as an educational consultant and ex-school principal enabled credibility with curriculum and political figures that was pivotal to any hope of success. Sadly, Tony lost his battle with cancer in mid 2010 while still awaiting the outcome of the process.

The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) is the professional peak body representing physical education teachers. In ACHPER's national statement on the curriculum future of Health and Physical Education (HPE) in Australia, outdoor education was described as a "sub-discipline" of physical education (ACHPER, 2009). Other ACHPER publications also mention outdoor education as one of several "components" of PE along with aquatics, athletics, ball games and the like. It's my contention that as a component of PE, ACHPER is mistakenly confusing outdoor activities or pursuits with outdoor education. The difference between outdoor education and physical education is well illustrated by examining key statements provided to the national curriculum process by ACHPER and the OEA.

The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation has called upon the Australian Government:

... to formally acknowledge:

Health and P.E is the area of the curriculum that provides education for children to learn how to lead healthy lifestyles now and in the future...for physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing [original emphasis].

HPE is the area of the curriculum that is directly concerned with the development of skills, knowledge, understandings, values and attitudes that will counter so called lifestyle diseases...

HPE is the area of the curriculum that engages students in learning related to contemporary, adolescent health issues. (ACHPER, 2009, p. 2)

In contrast, the OEA endorsed the following statement on outdoor education for the national curriculum process.

Outdoor Education provides unique opportunities to develop positive relationships with the environment, others and ourselves through interaction with the natural world. These relationships are essential for the wellbeing and sustainability of individuals, society and our environment. (OEA, 2010)

This drew on an earlier motive of service for outdoor education that stated the "ultimate goal of outdoor education was to contribute towards a sustainable community" (Marr, 2002a, p. 69). PE is focussed most on children's health and wellbeing.

OE is focussed most on human to nature relationships and the benefits that can ensue for people and the environment.

The challenge in advocating for outdoor education in the national curriculum is shaping outdoor education as not only distinctively different from health and physical education, but also congruent with the educational directions of guiding government publications on the future of education in Australia. To this end the national project team argued that outdoor education is necessary in the education of all Australians from two assumptions. First, there are aspects of outdoor education that enable important learning outcomes that are not pursued by any other subject. Second, although some outcomes are pursued by other subjects, outdoor education can achieve these outcomes at a deeper level.

What makes outdoor education distinctive in Australian curriculum?

The national curriculum submission argued that outdoor education as a subject is distinctive in schooling from three positions. First, it is the only subject to specifically seek to enable students to gain the skills and knowledge to live more closely with and connect with the natural world. Second, outdoor education seeks a deliberate critical perspective on aspects of contemporary living as they impact upon our relationship with nature. Third, outdoor education teaches personal assessment of risk and the management of it.

These three distinctive emphases were developed congruent of the rhetoric of the guiding government document, the Melbourne Declaration, in its call for "deep knowledge" within disciplines, demanding students learn to cope with rapid technological change and environmental change induced by global warming.

In addition, the national curriculum submission argued that there are student outcomes from outdoor education, which are achieved sometimes very well by other disciplines, but where outdoor education achieves the outcomes at a deeper and more thorough level. These include

- Personal development
- Group development
- Generic skills and general capabilities
- An understanding of Indigenous culture

I will not in this paper review in detail the case supporting these claims, but rather seek to describe the main thrust of them. A central challenge for outdoor education professionals in Australia, particularly those who work with schools, is to engage in debate on the claims of distinctiveness outlined here. Previous

research has indicated that outdoor education, even within the narrower scope of formalised schooling, seeks to achieve a diversity of learning outcomes (Lugg & Martin, 2001; Polley & Pickett, 2003). Clarifying the body of knowledge that supports outdoor education is problematic (Bucknell & Mannion, 2006; Martin, 2008a). Similarly the skills and knowledge base of outdoor education teachers is itself a contested area (Mann, 2002b; Martin, 2008b). In this context, where learning outcomes for students, the body of knowledge of teachers, and the qualifications they must attain are all debated or contested fields it seems unlikely a national curriculum for outdoor education can be realised. However, such a debate is central to the contributions and mandate of this journal and the profession that supports it. The following outlines the arguments for including outdoor education as a distinctive national curriculum contributor.

Connecting with the natural world. There is compelling evidence that contact with nature is fundamental to human wellbeing, but at the same time increasing urbanisation is distancing us from nature (Louv, 2005). In a national curriculum, outdoor education would be the only subject deliberately seeking to teach all Australian students how to recreate, explore, enjoy and learn from time with nature. Learning how to live comfortably outdoors is the first step towards basic ecological literacy, a literacy that is fundamental to our species continued existence on the planet (Orr, 1992, 2004). Being comfortable outdoors is a precursor to environmental stewardship. There is overwhelming evidence that caring for the natural world comes most readily to those citizens who enjoyed positive formative childhood experiences in nature (Chawla, 2007; Evans et al., 2007; Wells & Lekies, 2006). The majority of children in Australia today live and go to school in large urban settings and by the time they are young adults in their 20s over 70% of them will reside in one of our capital cities (ABS, 2009). In addition, the contact with nature that many older Australian's gained while walking or riding their pushbike to school or through casual weekend roaming seems to be denied for today's youth, lost under a haze of parental supervision and misplaced concern for children's security and welfare (Ziviani, Scott, & Wadley, 2004). These factors, together with the high number of school children whose parents grew up in other lands, means children's connection to, and confidence in, the Australian outdoors is low. The national curriculum submission argued that outdoor education has a capacity and mandate to connect children to the natural world. Outdoor education on the most basic level provides for students' primary experiences of nature, which they can see, feel, taste, hear or smell for themselves (Louv, 2005, p. 65).

Critical perspectives on contemporary living and human nature relationships. The Melbourne Declaration, highlighted rapid and continuing advances in technology leading to a need for students in today's world to be highly skilled in information and communication technologies. This is clearly true, however, there is a growing concern on the part of youth specialists, educationalists, parents and the public of the risks to young people's social skills and/or physical wellbeing from over-exposure to a virtual rather than real world. Outdoor education is not anti-technology, but the submission to the national curriculum argued that outdoor education is useful in enabling students to evaluate the role of technology in modern life, with a particular emphasis upon how technology shapes our personal responses and relationships to others and the natural environment (see for example, Wattchow, 2001). At its most basic, an extended overnight journey in a more remote natural setting demands students understand their real needs for things of food and water. It could deliberately invite reflection on our growing reliance upon screen-based entertainment and 24/7 global contact and critique how such reliance influences our relationships.

The Melbourne Declaration also highlighted how complex pressures such as climate change mean we must enable students to approach problem-solving in new and creative ways (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Outdoor education curricula have a role to play here. Coping with climate change includes changing environmental behaviour, the complexity of which should not be underestimated. Outdoor education is a subject in schools that does include both affective ways of knowing nature and more reasoned study of human to nature relationships. Ongoing direct personal experience of nature that evokes more emotive responses helps balance the rational ways of knowing that dominate scientific environmental discourse. This mix has been shown to be pivotal in creative problem solving and critical thinking (Belenky, 1997; DeLay, 1996) as well as shaping more caring and environmentally sympathetic behaviours.

The national curriculum submission positioned that in the light of global warming the future of humanity depends on our collective capacity to understand the role humans must play on earth and to act accordingly. We must be able to make critically informed decisions which fully consider the importance of natural ecosystems as well as the needs of humankind. The current challenge of global warming will only be solved when the thinking of humanity has evolved, so that the interconnection of everyday living and choice and the resource and energy demands we place on the planet's ecosystem are genuinely understood, not just by experts or enthusiasts but by everyone. These are complex

ideas to approach through schooling, but can be part of an outdoor education shaped to examine more sustainable living practices.

There are many good examples of outdoor education curricula, developed by schools or by state curriculum authorities that combine theoretical work in the classroom with experiential learning in the outdoors. This theoretical work has at its core a critical review of the relationship with the non-human natural world, which has emerged in western culture. As a social cultural study of the relationships of humans and nature, outdoor education academic curricula therefore draw on a range of topics. Some of the examples which currently exist in State level senior outdoor education studies include:

- An analysis of strategies to achieve sustainable use of natural environments.
- A critical review of representation of the outdoors in media and advertising.
- An analysis of motivations for recreation and outdoor adventure in popular culture.
- A review of the role of national parks or non-urban spaces in community and individual well-being.
- The importance of healthy natural environments and biodiversity for the future of individual physical and emotional wellbeing
- An understanding of community responses to environmental degradation and impactive development.
- An analysis of political mechanisms in social or community environmental activism.

This is usually classroom-based work, but it is absolutely essential to note that it makes little sense except in the context of experiential learning in the outdoors. This links the two distinctive elements of outdoor education: connecting with nature and developing a critique of contemporary living and human nature relationships.

Outdoor education teaches personal assessment of risk and the management of it. Outdoor education has a history of working with students in settings where adventure and calculated risk taking are central (Horwood, 1999). The national curriculum submission put the case that the third distinctive contribution that outdoor education makes to schooling is that of teaching students how to assess and manage risk. In

outdoor education, communicating risk includes the identification of the benefits to be gained, the hazards to be encountered and likelihood of occurrences, it's a disciplined analysis of a given situation and its context. There is no other subject area or school activity which confronts students with the assessment and management of risk in this way. Students take great risks in team sport, but they do so within a tight code of rules and practice over which they have little or no control. They are not required to assess risk, but rather to leave the issue of risk to those who have designed the game and to the referees that administer it.

The curriculum submission argued that risk assessment and management in the bush can be taught and learned and includes how judgements can be impaired by the influence of peer pressure, fatigue or haste. Outdoor education teaches risk assessment as a process in a safely monitored context, but one where real consequences are evident and feedback mechanisms are strong to facilitate effective learning. The provision of properly trained staff who are also educators accompanying each group is important from a risk minimization point of view, but also so that students can learn how to cope with risk as and after they confront it.

The arguments for outdoor education as distinctively teaching assessment and management of risk were seen by the project team to be important in a society where the highest ratio of accidental death occurs in the 15 to 24 age group (ABS, 2008).

Youth is a period characterized by rapid psychological and physical transition, where young people progress from being dependent children to independent adults. This transition period has been made more complex by the social, economic and technological changes that have occurred in Australia over recent decades. In this stage of life, people may be vulnerable to the influences of peer pressure and popular culture, and may be inclined to experiment, push boundaries and take risks that could impact on their immediate and longer term health and wellbeing. (ABS, 2008, p. 1)

An additional rationale for outdoor education in the national curriculum lies in teaching bush awareness to a future adult population. Australian's were once thought of as country people being increasingly forced to live in cities but retaining strong bush lore (Ward, 1958). Today, second and third generations are city dwellers and many parents are born overseas, so outdoor safety knowledge and awareness is lower. One consequence of Australia's climate, our large cities situated in a sparsely populated continent and the ease of access to the beach and bush is that the

outdoors will continue to attract an increasing number of Australians. Outdoor education can provide the knowledge and skills for safe outdoor recreation participation into the future. Regardless of the associated outcomes discussed above, simply teaching our population how to be outdoors safely is clear justification for a national curriculum contribution.

Ecological literacy.

The three unique contributions of outdoor education, namely (1) connecting to the natural world, (2) critical perspectives on contemporary living and (3) risk management along with outdoor living and travel skills are at the core of outdoor education. Together they constitute education for *ecological literacy* (Orr, 1992). Ecological literacy is "the ability to use ecological understanding, thinking and habits of mind for living in, enjoying and/or studying the environment" (Berkowitz, Ford, & Brewer, 2005, p. 228). For outdoor education, the ecologically literate person:

Is comfortable outdoors.

Seeks encounters with nature for recreation and health.

Has the knowledge and skills to safely and enjoyably explore nature while minimizing his or her impact.

Has a well developed understanding and sense of place from both personal experience and academic investigation.

Understands and values inter-relatedness between humans and nature (systems thinking).

Nourishes community and connections to place.

Has a deeply felt concern, even love, for the well-being of the Earth and all living things (stewardship).

Maintains sustainable beliefs and practices informed by principles of ecology, critical thought, judgement and action. (Martin, 2008b, p. 37)

Outcomes achievable by other subject areas but best through outdoor education.

Constructing a case for outdoor education's inclusion in the national curriculum is a vexed journey, not the least because any submission must respond to the imperatives of government as described in covering policy and documentation. The arguments put in this context may therefore differ in emphasis

nuance compared to those perhaps put to a parent principal sceptical of the benefits of outdoor education. Research in Victoria and South Australia supports the claim that most outdoor education teachers consider personal development outcomes to be the most important outcomes achieved by outdoor education in schools (Lugg & Martin, 2001; Polley & Skett, 2003). I would estimate that outdoor educators in other States and Territories would think likewise. The submission to include outdoor education in the national curriculum agrees with the importance of personal and group development outcomes from outdoor education, but the outcomes described previously are more defensively unique to outdoor education. As a consequence, the case for inclusion in the national curriculum argued that there are outcomes from outdoor education, which are achieved sometimes very well by other disciplines, but where outdoor education achieves the outcomes at a deeper level. These included: personal development, group development, contributing to general capabilities and understanding indigenous culture.

Personal development. The Melbourne Declaration placed considerable importance on the personal development of students. Students are to come:

confident and creative individuals... [who,]...have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical well-being...are enterprising, show initiative...develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9)

Many of the outcomes and attributes listed are congruent with the claims made by outdoor educators, although well researched evidence of this is hard to pin down. The national submission argued that the contextual ingredients that surround outdoor education practice create an educational milieu that has potency in enabling student self reflection and the fostering of personal attributes we have come to think of as character. Although the authenticity of character building has some critics (Brookes, 2003) the national curriculum submission chose to acknowledge the long history and focus of outdoor experiences in this regard.

Group development. The national curriculum submission also raised the capacity for outdoor education to promote teamwork and group development outcomes. Teamwork is a major outcome of many aspects of school life - sport, drama, music performance, class group work to name a few. Each of these is highly effective in teaching teamwork through experience. None of these activities work properly

without teamwork. Thus there can be no suggestion that these are not also important aspects of a young person's learning development.

The submission outlined by example the circumstantial aspects that are easily constructed via outdoor education activities that give both reality and consequence to working as a team. Group development has a history of being an important outcome for teachers of outdoor education and is implicit in many of the common practices that underpin the profession. A common claim in this regard is how outdoor education helps to create a positive school culture through successful common experience in challenging circumstances.

Generic skills and general capabilities. The Melbourne Declaration's mention of general capabilities has been discussed earlier in this paper. There are a number of capabilities developed well by outdoor education that are relevant here and should outdoor education be developed as a national curriculum subject it is very well placed to effectively promote and map such capabilities. In particular, the submission argued outdoor education can be effective to develop specific capabilities cited in the guiding government documentation, namely: problem solving, decision making, a readiness to try new ways of doing things, self management capabilities and teamwork. Again however, this is an area that is supported most by anecdotal rather than robust research evidence.

An understanding of Indigenous culture. The Melbourne Declaration declares as part of Goal 2 that all young Australians should become active and informed citizens, who "understand and acknowledge the value of indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9). It also declares that as a nation Australia values the role of education in building a society "that values Australia's indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation's history, present and future" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Does outdoor education have a contribution to make to this goal? At the risk of drawing a long bow, the team acknowledged how recent practice and discourse in outdoor education has begun to consider how outdoor education can contribute to a beginning in recognition of indigenous relationships with country and the importance given to indigenous ways of knowing. How this can be done in more than simplistic ways remains a challenge for the field in general.

Summary and conclusions

There are many outcomes from involvement in outdoor education which do not alone justify its inclusion in a national curriculum. Most obviously participation in outdoor activity can develop good health and physical fitness and be a preparation for a lifetime leisure activity but these outcomes, like many others, can also be achieved through other subjects, such as well constructed Physical Education and Health programmes. In the OEA endorsed submission to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) the authors mounted a case for inclusion of outdoor education as a subject. This endeavour was impeded by a lack of timely political advocacy supported by submission to key government discussion papers drafted through 2008 and 2009. This meant for example, that no reference to outdoor education was made in any of the guiding policy documents. It also meant that outdoor education had to make a choice as to which pre-existing key learning area it would reside within – resulting in the somewhat paradoxical situation of arguing for separateness from physical education whilst lobbying to be included in the Health and Physical Education Learning area as a distinct subject.

The national curriculum submission was framed around the distinctiveness of outdoor education in promoting a connection to nature, a capacity for critical thinking about human nature relationships leading to ecological literacy and the importance of assessing and managing risks. It acknowledged also the role of outdoor education in personal and group development while accepting such outcomes were not unique in schooling. The veracity of the claims made is contestable and highlights the need for ongoing research that is both targeted and co-ordinated.

Not only are the claims for outdoor education's potency in learning contestable, so too is the un-stated implication that those who teach outdoor education in schools would agree that the distinctive learning outcomes described here are the most important. As a process or method of learning and teaching, outdoor education is applied widely. However, as a subject it is more closely defined and is evolving specific content that does reflect the distinctive elements described here (Martin, 2008a). A shift to a national subject would demand that existing State based curricula find consensus in terms of both content and desired learning outcomes. This would be contested and demanding work but I argue that it would ultimately contribute to a clarity of purpose and consensus in practice unparallel in our short professional history.

The national curriculum will fundamentally reshape education in Australia. This paper sought to summarise the thrust of the strategic directions taken by Outdoor Education Australia in positioning outdoor

education as a subject in that reshaping. Regardless of the success of the bid, this submission must signal for outdoor educators who work in schools the beginning of an era of affirmation. Outdoor education teachers have spent long enough speaking among ourselves about what it is that we do. For those who work in schools and those who support such work, it is timely to affirm which contributions to education are most needed and distinctive and to give most energy and support to those endeavours.

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About the author

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