This is an essay I completed in fourth year for “Connecting Society and Environment”. It examines the importance of teaching humanities. The essay covers many important aspects of teaching the Humanities and exhibits not only my content knowledge, but the pedagogical approaches used to support learning for this content area. It also demonstrates my awareness of the importance of integrating learning across different content areas and methods of doing this.

Please view highlighted sections for relevant evidence.

**Why is the teaching of Humanities important for students in their early years of formal education?**

The teaching of Humanities in primary education has recently come under scrutiny with the shift of a state curriculum to a national one and what should and shouldn’t be included in this new curriculum. In this transition phase, Victorian schools are using the curriculum framework AusVELS that incorporates the state Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and aspects of the new national Australian Curriculum. AusVELS describes the Humanities as “the study of human societies and environments, people and their cultures in the past and present.” This paper aims to critically examine the values of teaching Humanities in primary school by exploring how it relates to the current curriculum, the personal and intellectual development of children, pedagogical approaches and the connection between humanities and values education.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians signify two main goals of education; that “all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens and Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008 p.7). These goals paved the way in developing the Australian Curriculum. It brought to light the need to examine curriculum in relation to the Humanities as the main goal of this is to nurture “informed and active citizens” (Reynolds, 2012, p.21). Anderson (2002) suggests a major issue in the worth of humanities in the curriculum is that society values realms that provide “direct avenues of application” (p.130) and many see
the Humanities as not having direct learning outcomes that are easily assessable. Marsh (2010) believes the main issue is that people are confused of what is involved in teaching Humanities due to the labelling of the subject changing and evolving throughout history. Maths is maths, yet Humanities has been called Social Studies, SOSE, Civics and Citizenship and many more” (Marsh, 2010). While both Marsh (2010) and Anderson (2002) point out valid issues, teachers need to be aware of these issues and have a strong knowledge of the Humanities in order to teach it effectively. Marsh (2010) also states that Julia Gillard (deputy Prime Minister at the time) in 2008 proposed our national curriculum will be “future oriented and will equip our young people with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to compete internationally and thrive in a globalised economy’s future” (p.5). This statement reiterates the importance of ensuring quality Humanities education is implemented into our curriculum as in the 21st century our global ties are stronger than ever before with things such as technology allowing us to communicate with people all over the world. AusVELS and the Australian curriculum both have the Humanities across all years and integrated into other subject areas, reflecting Gillard’s statement. As Reynolds (2012) demonstrates, in this changing time of curriculum, it is important teachers find ways to “integrate all the topics and ideas they have to teach” (p.20). As it stands, AusVELS incorporates the Humanities as a whole from foundation to level 4 and then from levels 5-10 the Humanities is split into History, Geography and Economics. The Australian Curriculum currently has History separate yet Humanities is integrated cross curricular. This signifies the importance of incorporating the Humanities throughout all levels of primary education and beyond and connecting it with other subject areas. Ewins (2006) points out that in an already overcrowded curriculum, integration is of the utmost importance.

The way in which children develop intellectually and personally is a prime example of the importance of including the Humanities in the curriculum. Constructivism is a common theory of learning based on work from Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) that shows that learners construct knowledge through building on experiences, they absorb new ideas and integrate them into existing ideas and knowledge is constructed through social interaction and the world around them (McInerney and McInerney, 2010). Reynolds (2012) explains that Humanities is best taught with an inquiry approach in
which open ended learning takes place and students take a substantial amount of control over their own learning and construct knowledge by assimilating new knowledge into their prior knowledge. This is reflective in constructivist learning. Fraser (1999) backs this up but comments on the importance of ensuring that material is culturally relevant to develop meaningful curriculum to engage students. While Dry (2010) agrees with this to a certain extent, he states it is important for this to be effective students should have a “growth mindset” (p.18) in that the actual process of learning is praised not the outcome. In a classroom setting this is often clear in that even though they may not reach a conclusion, the process of learning is what has been beneficial. Some students may find not having a concluding outcome to mean they failed and got nothing out of the task. Not only do the Humanities exemplify the ways in which children learn and develop naturally, but it also helps their intellectual and personal development expand. Ewins (2006) demonstrates that the Humanities nurture student’s empathy, develop personal identities, active participation in society, values and critical thinking. Dry (2010) also states this and adds that they become empathetic, compassionate learners connected to a global community. Children’s intellectual and personal development nurtured in schools in not just about acquiring knowledge and facts, it is about giving them the tools to learn how to live in a globalised, social environment in which “communication and living in harmony with others is of primary importance” (Reynolds, 2012, p.27). This is what the Humanities cultivate.

For these personal and intellectual developments to be effective, quality pedagogical approaches must be employed. Teachers should know how these developments occur and apply strategies to facilitate this. If Humanities is best learnt through using an inquiry based approach, teachers should ensure they are adept in teaching this way. Reynolds (2012) suggests that teachers should encourage students to find things out for themselves and articulate ideas, look at things from different angles, provide feedback about their learning, give students opportunities for questioning, gathering information, and give opportunities for students to form ideas by organising new information and demonstrate what they have learnt. Dry (2010) and Reynolds (2012) both suggest this approach creates many opportunities for students to become globalised and also advocate the use ICT as a positive example of a pedagogical approach to facilitate this.
If students learn by interacting with the world around them, ICT provides opportunities not only for research and critical thinking, but a tool of communication and information for not just their immediate communities but globally, thus facilitating inquiry based learning. As twenty-first century learners, students are able to connect with the wider world and have opportunities to become active members in the world around them. Reitano (2009) adds that many teachers have misconceptions about the Humanities and find it “boring” (p.25) because of their own education and should ensure they make it engaging and relevant for their students. It shouldn’t be about memorising dates and facts but more related to people. Integrating the Humanities is also another important issue that needs to be considered when looking at pedagogical approaches. Fraser (1999) explains that curriculum integration (CI) helps students make connections and link knowledge, promotes independent learning and draws upon issues of “global and local significance to students” (p.1) as the Humanities is linked in with other disciplines and made relevant to the individual student’s lives. This is reflective in how students develop. Marsh (2010) doesn’t deny the quality of CI yet warns that teachers should be wary of the purpose of the Humanities in integration, “is it to transmit knowledge or transform?” (Marsh, 2010, p.5). This suggests that teachers need to integrate the Humanities in a way that allows for critical thinking and not just knowledge and facts, but how to learn and make good choices. Reynolds (2012) explains that an integrated Humanities should include “content, skills, learner, context, pedagogy and values” (p.264). Fraser (1999) has similar integrated approaches but also states that the teacher needs to be clear about what the subject matter is and flexibility is the key. With careful planning, teachers can integrate the Humanities in many subject areas to create links for students.

The humanities have a significant connection with values education. Reynolds (2012) defines values as “estimations of worth, priority or significance of some object, feeling or idea (p.118). The importance we place on something is its value. When we talk about values education, Reynolds (2012) explains that this is education that “promotes student understanding and knowledge of values” (p.119). The Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) listed nine values for Australian schools; “care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility and
understanding, tolerance and inclusion “(p.4). Prior (2009) explains the link between the Humanities and values education by discussing how the Humanities is about social education and to be socially educated one must have an understanding of their own personal nature and values and the values of the world around them to engage globally and locally. Cumming-Potvin (2009) reiterates this notion and explains to meet these goals, students need to be given the tools to develop a “sense of community” in the classroom and “nurture student’s ideas on social justice” by encouraging active participation and critical thought (p.82). Both MCEETYA (2008) and Reynolds (2012) make it clear that a main goal of education is to build a democratic society so students will have respect and understanding of “cultural, social and religious diversity” (MCEETYA, 2008, p.7) leading to a community that values both equity and social justice. Much of these skills are taught in the Humanities. Aspin (2007) poses that the issue isn’t about the importance of the Humanities and values education, but ensuring learning is “across the lifespan” (p.46). This is reflective of an earlier point that we should be teaching students not just knowledge, but how to learn, so they are able to use their knowledge and values when confronted with issues in society and be able to make their own positive choices. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2008) made a report on values education that explained it is best taught within all facets of the curriculum. It should be imbedded in the language used throughout the whole school, in all subject areas and should be student-centred and open ended. This mirrors the approach that Humanities take. Values education should engage students by providing them with “real-life learning” and encourage reflection and personal action (DEEWR, 2008, p.9). The DEEWR (2008) report also states that effective values education should empower students to make decisions and engage them to move from the stage of understanding the knowledge of a value to a commitment to actively live these values to create a better society. This emulates what the Humanities stand for. By investigating human societies, people and cultures in the past and present and looking towards the future, students are able examine the world around them and where they and their values reside.

The teaching of Humanities is important for students in their early years of formal education and beyond. Children develop through gaining meaning from the world around them, social interactions and making
connections with new information to their prior knowledge. Excluding Humanities education in the early years wouldn’t allow for this connection to foster. Effective learning takes place when it is meaningful to the students. The integration of Humanities and values education are imbedded cross curricular which is reflective on how students learn allowing Humanities education to foster. For this to be effective teachers need to employ effective pedagogical approaches such as an inquiry based approach that encourages independent learning, critical thinking and control over their learning. This promotes life-long learning that is imperative to being informed and active members of an increasingly globalised society. Values education and the Humanities encourage a democratic society where individuals are actively involved and value and respect one another regardless of diversity. To omit Humanities from children’s early years of formal education would be detrimental to their development and that of society.

Word Count: 2003
References


