

Going On Together Beyond the Foundation: Primary School Pasts in a New Epistemic Climate

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In this article I reveal the epistemic shift currently underway at Victorian primary schools, which is making a radical difference to how children are taught to relate to the past. I work to help readers understand this shift by mapping it onto a broader philosophical move from foundational empiricism to relational empiricism. I provide an example of relational methodology by showing past and imagination being made double in practice, asking what futures are being made possible. I close with suggestions about how we might reassess lessons about the past within this new epistemological climate.

Imagine yourself experiencing three episodes that occurred while I was observing grade 3 and 4 classrooms in Melbourne primary schools.

After songs, games and a quick toilet break, Hans tells the morning story while the children sit cross-legged, some tugging at their knitted slippers but all attentive.

He memorises the story every night from his book of Norse myths so that it will become ‘living’. They are myths told as stories, but they also have facts. Hans tells his class that these things happened very long ago. When asked where Denmark is, he answers that it is very close to where Thor and Odin lived. Many questions, however, can have no real answers. Why didn’t the Gods have girl children? Because it was just the way it was.

The children really enjoy these stories; they are physically engaged and miming the actions to go along with dramatic moments. Taking the story into their bodies, two boys pretend to twist Thor’s head off as Loki threatens to do so. In a mime of terror, Sarah cowers behind Hans’ foot. Whenever the story mentions the giantess Jorth, all the class turn to look at their classmate with the same name. She sits up straighter and becomes visibly attentive.

I am sitting on the couch, watching these stories being told day after day, and feeling frustrated, thinking, ‘Yes, they might be enjoying them, but they’re not true!’¹

Mary is reading to her class about life in Victorian gold rush shantytowns. She tells them that people then had to sleep on sacks of leaves, and she says: ‘Just imagine what that would be like! Now we’ve got these nice mattresses with wadding and springs. Imagine. Leaves! Sounds a bit lumpy to me.’ She reads on, now about how gold miners marked their houses with flags and boots on poles. She says: ‘I wonder what we’d use now if we did that?’ Hands go up, and kids start to whisper to each other. Mary decides that’s a question to explore later.

I am sitting at the teacher’s desk, seeing the children enjoy this lesson, and I am thinking: ‘It’s a good lesson, but why would imagining your own body transported back to the past

tell you how things felt then? Probably a bed stuffed with leaves was lumpy luxury for many of those men. The past just didn’t look or feel the same as the present.’²

The kids are polite, but bored. We have a special guest here today, sitting up the front with Mary. An old woman, who needs help standing up from her chair but who still goes dancing every week. She is here to tell the class about her experiences of migrating to Australia. She was born the daughter of an English accountant in Egypt, a real lady back then, who had to come to Australia with her husband when Nasser gained power. She’d had maids in Egypt, but when she got to Australia she found she had to do all her own washing and all her own ironing! And, oh! she cried and cried! She and Mary laugh together, imagining this poor privileged girl weeping at her ironing board, and Mary replies with a similar story about her friend from India.

At the end the children are invited to talk to the old lady. They gather around, clamouring to tell her about their own families’ migrations, how they’ve been on planes themselves, and about their grandmas and grandpas. Few ask about her; just three girls, who look through the photo album of life back in Egypt. They giggle, and say: ‘Was that you? Your hair is funny.’

Mary and I go to morning tea together. Mary tells me how pleased she is that the lesson went so well. But I’m thinking, ‘No, that’s wrong! The kids were rude. They talked about themselves and didn’t empathise.’ I don’t know how to reply to Mary.³

In what follows I am going to re-imagine what it means to teach the past at primary schools. This re-imagining will shift topics and timescales, at some points working close to the real time of classrooms, and at other points compressing years to tell about curriculum change and the development of philosophical theory.

My argument is simple, although perhaps surprising. It is this: knowing is now conceived as being able to act with the world. This is written into the new curriculum, theorised in the work of some philosophers, and enacted in teacher practice. But if good knowing

means being able act in the world, how might we assess lessons about the past? I seek to theorise teacher practice to answer this question.

I shall show that this change in what it means to know has been built into the curriculum and affects how teachers and academics should practise their crafts. According to the curriculum, instead of aiming for rational and informed knowers, schools are to work towards training children to speak and act in useful and sensible ways. They should not build knowledge about the past in the minds of children, but aim for students being able to interact with others in new ways. Instead of judging lessons in terms of accurate representations of the past, academics should judge the skills they give children to relate to the present and the future. To conceive of knowledge as being able to act with the world throws into question the viability and the value of skills that academics—and confused researchers such as I showed myself to be above—have traditionally believed essential to good historical knowing: vivid pictorial imagination, thinking into pasts as different from presents, and empathy.

I shall explore the nature and the implications of this change in three places: in the new curriculum, in the work of a small group of philosophers, and in teacher practice.

I shall start with the curriculum, working to re-imagine the process of curriculum change that has taken us from the 2000 Curriculum Standards Framework, second edition (CSF II) to the 2006 Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). I shall argue that the conception of the ideal knower has changed during the years between one curriculum and the other. The core of the change is a move from thinking about multiple perspectives to multiplying possibilities for action. Next, I shall ask how we might use the insights of philosophers to shed light on these different knowers and the types of knowledge they have. I shall suggest that a shift has occurred, from what I call ‘foundational knowledge’ to ‘relational knowledge’. I shall map this shift onto curriculum change, explaining curriculum change as embedding relational empiricism. This will be made clear through a classroom example. Throughout I shall return to my initial sense of discomfort, working towards a way to make sense of what teachers were doing for their students. I shall end with some thoughts on how, in the epistemic frame developed, we might locate success in primary school lessons.

1. CURRICULUM

1.1 CURRICULA, KNOWERS AND CITIZENS: COMPARING CSF II AND VELS

Had I been sitting in primary school classrooms in the first years of the new millennium, I would probably have experienced quite different types of lesson from those above. At that time, the 1995 Curriculum Standards Framework had just been revised in consultation with 15,000 Victorian teachers and educationalists to become the Curriculum Standards Framework, second edition (CSF II). As always, this curriculum aimed to help children become adults capable of succeeding in the present and future world. But what type of person would be successful? And what would the world of the present and future be like? The last ten years have seen a shift in the Victorian curriculum away from rational decision-makers towards people who are good at applying their thinking.

By definition, a successful adult for the curriculum is a certain type of knower. Throughout, CSF II had a very clear sense of who the ideal knower was and what their knowledge should enable. The good knower would be a ‘well-informed citizen able to form judgments and make critical decisions affecting the society in which they live’.⁴ They should be able ‘to think about how things got to be the way they are [and be able] to make rational and informed decisions’.⁵ Good knowers were reflective and rational decision makers, ‘removed judging observers’.⁶

The present and future were seen as presenting certain challenges that the curriculum would meet. For CSF II, challenge was twofold. The first was the challenge of too much easily available information. What would it mean to know well when the Internet and other digital technologies could deliver huge quantities of information so quickly and easily? Attending to these questions would eventually mean re-assessing the value put on various types of knowing. In both editions of the CSF, though, information technology would only be taught more, not differently. They represent a stopgap rather than a revolution.

In the first edition of CSF, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) was to be taught, but left separate from the work in other subjects. In CSF II, information technologies were ‘embedded’ in all Key Learning Areas (or KLAs, meaning English, Maths, etc.)

to help prepare students ‘for work and learning in an increasingly information rich world’.⁷ They would use information technologies to help them reflect on the traditional disciplinary subjects.⁸

The second challenge was teaching citizenship to members of a multicultural nation in an increasingly global world. This was the midst of the Howard years, during which the History Wars raged.⁹ How to teach Australian history in ways that would build a sense of loyal citizenship while also making sure children were informed of Aboriginal dispossession?

The answer for CSF II was appropriate to the climate of cultural relativism. According to CSF II, Australia was cut across with cultures which provided people with various ‘viewpoints’ and ‘perspectives’ that should be understood and tolerated. Lessons in Languages Other Than English (LOTE) would be taught to give students ‘insights into culture’ and ‘to learn that there are many ways of viewing the world’. In lessons in Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) students would learn to ‘clarify values and attitudes affecting society and the environment, in particular tolerance of people from many cultures and commitment to the democratic process’.¹⁰ They would reflect on and act to endorse socio-cultural difference.

Over the months and years since then, the curriculum has remained a concern for the Victorian Education Department. In 2004 the *Blueprint for Government Schools* was published, with the intention of identifying and publicising policies that would reduce the gap between schools displaying ‘best practice’ and those with high rates of student failure. One recommendation was that the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority should work on a new curriculum, one that identified a ‘framework of “essential learnings”’.¹¹ This was the impetus for what has become known as the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, or VELs.

Underlying VELs is the perception that the challenges of present and future are increasing at accelerating rates: more and more complex, rich in information and technologies, and global in outlook. Everything seems to be spinning faster. To succeed in this vortex demands ‘high-order knowledge and understanding’. Students need to manage themselves and others and to be able to act effectively. Acting effectively means being capable of creating a future that is sustainable, builds strong communities with common purposes and values, and is innovative.¹²

Change itself is the predominant challenge, and a reflective decision-maker is no longer the ideal knower to deal with this. Now students are to be ‘skilled, flexible, responsible and creative’, able to ‘apply their knowledge beyond the classroom to new and different situations’.¹³

To this end VELs is composed of three strands.¹⁴ Alongside ‘Discipline-Based Learning’ (the transformed KLAs) lies ‘Physical, Personal and Social Learning’ and ‘Interdisciplinary Learning’. In ‘Interdisciplinary Learning’ (made up of four discrete areas: Information and Communications Technology; Thinking Processes; Design, Creativity and Technology; and Communications), students will learn to deal flexibly, creatively and innovatively with new information. This new strand represents a transformation of what is considered necessary to be a good knower.

Students are also to be taught to think differently about culture. Instead of ‘socio-cultural understanding’ students in LOTE are to develop ‘intercultural knowledge’ and awareness. Instead of recognising difference, students are now to focus on what cultures have in common, what can be built in the intersection of cultures. They will learn to ‘understand social, historical, familial relationships and other aspects of the specific language and culture’. This will provide them with ‘guidelines for effective communication’.¹⁵ There is no talk here of viewpoints, perspectives or tolerance.

1.2 KNOWING THE PAST IN CSF II AND VELs

How would these different ideal knowers know the past? The answer is clear in the introductory social studies courses for primary schools. In CSF II this course is called Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), and is the ‘study of human progress and how people have organised themselves into societies over time... [It] examines how humans organise themselves into communities and states to form institutions and systems’.¹⁶ In VELs the course is renamed ‘humanities’ that ‘take as their subject matter human behaviour’. These lessons will ‘provide unique ways to understand how and why groups of people have settled where they have, organised their societies’.¹⁷ SOSE looks at what has been done; humanities looks at how and why.¹⁸

This makes a big difference for how students might know the past. If the past (and the present) is made up of groups of people

organised into discrete societies and communities that dictate world views, knowers will need think themselves into those other world views. They will need to use imagination as empathy to cross cultural boundaries. Imagination as empathy is assumed necessary to CSF II.

Not so in VELs. In VELs the past (and the present) is made up of relationships between people who are behaving in ways related to social, economic and environmental systems.¹⁹ Students, working towards a sustainable future, are to think about how people deal with challenges, why they have made their decisions, and what they might have done otherwise. To do so they won't only need imagination as empathy, but imagination for connecting information, making predictions, and generating alternatives.²⁰

Let us now go deeper into how the past looks in each epistemic and curricula frame. I shall begin with the epistemology that underlies CSF II, and shall assert that this curriculum enacted what I shall call here 'relativist foundational empiricism'. My reaction to the classroom episodes I related at the beginning of this paper initially reveal that I share this empiricism. It is my belief that most historians also share this position, without having necessarily made it explicit to themselves.

I shall find a way of recognising foundational empiricism by investigating Nigerian mathematics education.

2. PHILOSOPHY

2.1 RECOGNISING FOUNDATIONAL EMPIRICISM

I shall use Helen Verran's story of coming to recognise foundational empiricism to help my readers recognise it also. This will help to explain the changes we have seen in the curriculum, and act as a basis for a reassessment of the lessons I opened with.

Verran worked as a teacher educator in Nigeria, part of a United Nations' program to improve science and maths teaching in places where resources were scarce. She found herself teaching language and numbering to experienced teachers, men and women profoundly bi-lingual in English and Yoruba. As she assessed their efforts in the classroom she found herself becoming disconcerted, as lessons that she thought of as textbook fell flat while those she saw as getting the logic behind the mathematics completely wrong succeeded

wonderfully, both in keeping the children's attention and in building their skills. She struggled to make sense of these experiences, paying particular attention to what the consequences of her analysis would be for helping the Yoruba people use numbers.²¹

She gradually came to see that all her efforts were being directed, constrained even, by an underlying metaphysics, which she called 'foundational empiricism'. She came to recognise its ubiquity in our beliefs about knowing. She found, as I do, that it is very difficult to describe this metaphysics because we are so accustomed to it that it seems obviously, naturally correct. However, she also found that using this metaphysics made it impossible to explain the ways that her teachers were using numbers in their classrooms, in forms she felt were both novel and ethical.

What does this metaphysics look like? At its heart it is based on a three-part division, conceiving as separate world, knowledge and knower. According to foundationalist metaphysics, the world is made up of knowable ordered matter. Knowledge lies on top of that world, reflecting it. Knowers hold knowledge in their minds, removed from the world but able to observe and judge it, and in the process building new knowledge.²²

If we look back at the first story I told, of children listening with enjoyment to the myths at their Steiner school, we can see that my objections can be easily explained as failing the requirements of foundational empiricism. I was seeing knowers (the children) being taught knowledge (the myths) that were based on an unreal world but were being presented as truth. This looked like straightforward lies, because teachers were purposefully misrepresenting the ground of truth that is the world.

What about my other two stories? To come to understand my knee-jerk objections to these, I have to look further into foundational empiricism to see that there are two ways to be a foundationalist.

Central to Verran's argument is that this three-tiered metaphysics does not only describe universalist assumptions (taking the world as real, independent of socialised minds) but also relativist assumptions (taking the world to be always mediated and constructed by the social). What distinguishes the two is not the separation of world from knower—because both make this separation—but the origins of the order that makes up the world itself. In universalist thought, she argues, the world is ordered by physical laws. The world is as it is,

and knowers can describe it in more or less exact ways. A universalist approach to history would see the behaviour of humans to be governed or ordered by a certain set of laws—called perhaps ‘human nature’ or ‘identical perceptual apparatus’ or ‘biological drives’. The contexts of human lives might change, but the basic pattern of human responses does not. Explaining human history as a universalist would require knowing both the human laws and the specific material context in detail, and plugging the first into the second. Imagining the past would mean imagining oneself in that context.

This was what I saw being taught in the second story. Children were being encouraged to imagine their own bodies in the environment of the past, with no suggestion that the people who were really there would have seen the world differently. What I was expecting to see was a presentation of the past which reminded children that the past was ‘a foreign country’ and thus fundamentally unfamiliar to them. I objected to children being taught to imagine themselves in a past that is the same as the present, except for different material surroundings. In experiencing this reaction, I was revealing my assumption of a relativist foundation.

For a relativist there is no such thing as a world *a priori* of human work. According to relativism, humans gain mental categories with which to see the world from their language and culture. The way they see the world depends on how and where they grew up. This would mean that the knowledge of different cultures or different times must be specific to that group, and any similarities between groups must signal past interactions. For anthropologists or profoundly bi-lingual people, this presents a challenge. Learning a new language and culture would mean learning to see the world anew and developing the ability to switch easily between two or more worlds. For historians, the task would be to step away from one’s own cultural assumptions and climb into the language, culture and world view of the other time and place being studied (to the extent that this is possible). This would require grappling with a deep unfamiliarity, aiming towards an empathy that goes beyond simply imagining oneself in the past. It would be an empathy that tries to see the world through another’s eyes, not just from standing in their shoes.

In my third story, this type of empathy was just what I was seeing fail to take hold in the students. Despite the spirited stories of the guest, the children were not seeing the world from the eyes of this

elderly ‘new’ Australian. I had assumed this was what we would be aiming for, but the teacher wasn’t concerned. Like many others,²³ I did not consider this to be due to a mistake in the suppositions of relativist foundational epistemology, but in the skills of the teacher or the story-telling of the old lady. But is there a third way to understand these lessons?

While we can distinguish between two types of foundational empiricism, thinking in this way has a common effect that I wish to avoid. Seeing these lessons as part of the mode of foundational epistemology blames the teachers, seeing them fail in various ways—in telling the truth, in showing the past as fundamentally different from the present, in encouraging empathy. But the teachers believe they have succeeded, and they are not wrong. These lessons are not failures; what fails are our tools to theorise them. How to recognise and explain what is happening becomes my next task. To do so I need to understand the claims of relational or emergent empiricism. So it is to this philosophy that I now turn.

2.2 A PHILOSOPHY OF A RELATIONAL WORLD

Verran makes these claims about foundational empiricism to show what is novel in a new way of thinking about how we know. She calls this new way ‘relational’ or ‘emergent empiricism’. It is what I believe we are now seeing enacted in primary schools.

Relational empiricism understands knowledge as being made as practices in specific times and places. In relational empiricism, knowing is not having facts in our minds but being able to speak and act in ways that make sense within the webs or networks of ideas, words, skills, concepts and theories, and the webs of other people and physical objects. It does not assume a separation between knowers and the world, because people, things, concepts, entities—all are made and re-made together and simultaneously.²⁴ It means being able to use words, gestures, thoughts and signs to usher in entities. Knowing succeeds when entities work—that is, when they make sense to other people, to context and to physical setting. This is what I mean by ‘knowing how to act’.

This is not based on a distinction between facts and experience. Instead, ‘facts’ are made in ‘experience’. We need to ask about how ‘facts’ are made in learning experiences, not as things that we then

hold in our heads as fixed bodies of information, but as entities that we make and can use in a range of ways in the future. Having spent much time trying to understand this, I am aware that it is hard to grasp. So I shall introduce several concepts—about reality, about knowing and about acting—that I shall then embed in an episode to serve as an example of what I mean.

First, we need a rethinking of reality. I use philosopher of science Ian Hacking to help. He suggests that we have misconceived the real. To Hacking, the real is not something static that we represent but something that we come to know through our interactions with it. From babyhood we come to know the real by using it to pull ourselves to our feet and stand on. Embodied creatures, we pull the real and push it, and learn what happens. ‘Reality has to do with causation and our notions of reality are formed from our abilities to change the world.’²⁵ This has consequences, for if we accept Hacking’s view we should not be content with perfect representations of the world, but work towards the best ways to interact with it.

This is developed in detail by philosopher Kathryn Pyne Addelson, who sees life as a series of moral passages during which we interact with others and with the physical world. To her this means that we should not look only backwards, but forwards, always aware that what we do and say makes a difference to the future. From Addelson we gain a notion of ethics, of good knowing based on good acting.²⁶

We also need a notion of how acting can function as making knowledge. For this I call on philosopher of language John Austin’s concept of the performative. The classic example of this is the wedding ceremony. Given the right setting, saying the words ‘I do’ at the right moment results in making oneself into a husband or wife. Performing something in the right way makes a difference to what there is—an unmarried human is made into a married human. There has been an ontic shift, a shift in how people and things are related.²⁷

Adopting this perspective on knowing has a startling consequence—it recognises that knowing can be multiple. What does this mean? The work of Annemarie Mol guides us.²⁸ While doing ethnographic fieldwork in a Dutch hospital, Mol saw atherosclerosis being enacted as multiple diseases in different clinical departments. She saw patients with the same disease, and suffering in various ways, being sent to different parts of the hospital for diagnosis and treatment. How their diseased legs and their suffering were seen

depended on whether they were looked at by the eyes of the mobility therapist, the x-rays of clinicians or the microscopes of pathologists. Being put in certain webs of relations changed the meaning of their disease. In consequence, interventions differed. While in one part of the hospital it was a disease that interrupted mobility and was treated by walking, in another it was seen as a disease of mortality and was treated by major surgery. This was caused by assessments of severity, and its consequence was the enactment of a multiple disease.²⁹

One final point before I move back into the primary schools. Returning to my question of how primary schools teach the past, the way of phrasing this question is now insufficient. If learning about the past is part of our webs of relationships enacted in collective life, how we do so affects other relationships. In the push and pull of relatedness, other things change. How we make the past has implications for how we are able to make the future and, indeed, as we saw earlier, this is a curricula intention. We also remake other things, including the cognitive tools we use to think about pasts and futures. One of these transfigured tools is the entity of ‘imagination’.

It has been apparent throughout this paper that it is a commonplace to see ourselves as knowing the past through imagination as empathy, though seeing things from another’s viewpoint. There are many ways to imagine the past, and they have different consequences for how that past is made and for how we can remake the future. But more on that shortly; now I shall illustrate the above claims with a story.

3. PRIMARY SCHOOL PRACTICE

3.1 AN EXAMPLE OF RELATIONAL KNOWING: ENACTING PAST AND IMAGINATION AS DOUBLE

It is nearing Easter at this Anglican school, and the religious education teacher is taking the children through the Biblical narrative that leads Christians up to the resurrection.³⁰ Split into groups, the children ask if they can perform the events they have been assigned to explain. Mrs Jackson says they can, and turning to me, rolling her eyes and saying, ‘I don’t know why they’re going to do a play when they’ve only got five minutes to prepare.’

They use most of those minutes cutting paper to make crosses, palm fronds and crowns for props. The groups take turns up the front. Most groups play for laughs, with the teacher laughing too and filling in lines and narrative gaps where necessary. The children, the teacher and I laugh as Jesus is bucked off his donkey in one group's performance, and in another the child bumbles the words she needs to turn water into wine. We see paper palm leaves waved with vigour on 'Palm Sunday' and Pilate hand down the sentence with a paper cross for a gavel. In the climactic scene, Jesus is resurrected as he falls off the row of chairs he has been lying across, and wanders over zombie-like to the boy playing Mary Magdalene who responds 'Jesus? I'm shocked!' The teacher congratulates the students, then supplements their acting by telling the story much as it is written.

How should we think about this? How are children and teachers, Biblical and comical pasts, relations of authority and popularity, pictorial and bodily imagination becoming related here? What pasts are made? What imaginations and what futures?

I see at least two pasts being made simultaneously, using two different types of imagination and laying the foundation for two forms of future acting. These two do not remain separate (although for clarity I shall speak as if they do) but enfold each other. I do not see them as distinct in terms of their truth-value, but because of the authority they gather and the consequences they have for future acting.

One past is that of the teacher re-telling the Biblical story. In this setting, she has authority as the adult and teacher, and her account has added weight sourced from the children's awareness that it is printed in a book, told at church and, for many, their belief that it is sacred. Mrs Jackson tells these truths as a story, understood (or so she is presuming for most children) with a certain type of imagination. This imagination, suited to narratives, is that of 'pictures in the mind' called up by the visual and emotive words of the story.

At the very least the Biblical story the teacher tells can be said to be true because it works in this setting.³¹ It makes sense in terms of earlier knowledge, experiences in using imagination to understand stories, and established power relations between teacher and student.

But this is not the only way the past is being made, although it is the most powerful, because the children are performing the past also. They do so with an imagination that creatively mines the story for comedic juxtapositions and convenient shorthands to help performance. Telling the story in the way they do calls up and alters other relationships. Imagination as 'doing humorous performance' is made valuable by class laughter, remaking class popularity and roles. The teacher's authority is under threat, giving her few choices but to laugh with them. This past is made as burlesque. The children are now (more) able to express irreverence towards the Bible and its past and, given the humour they have seen irreverence generate are, perhaps, more likely to.

From this lesson, teacher and students have particular capacities to remake the future. Mrs Jackson's account enables her to encourage students to attend Easter services and to collect their Lenten boxes. Her account has power, as revealed by the clinking coins as students give her their Lenten boxes.

But students can also do otherwise, acting in ways that continue to build social relations based on irreverence. One asks Mrs Jackson, in a show of seriousness, if church candles will be burnt despite the fire ban. During lunchtime, some boys 'sword fight' with the flax crosses given out at chapel that morning. They will, or will not, want to go to Easter services.

The past, the future and imagination are all remade in practice; this is what emergent philosophy can enable us to see happening at primary schools. Perhaps teachers have always known this, and now curriculum designers and academics are coming to understand it also.

So what might we now say about the lessons at the beginning of this paper? What would be considered a good lesson now? I would now suggest two connected issues that I did not take seriously when I sat in those classrooms. One regards imagination. What type of imagination is being called up? What are teachers assuming about the types of imagination appropriate to learning the past? How does that affect the types of past being made here, which children are likely to think appropriate at later points? The second issue concerns the future. What future are teachers implicitly preparing students for? Are they making a past appropriate to do so?

3.2 ASSESSING AGAIN

To answer these questions for each teacher requires some background knowledge and some reading between the lines. I shall be brief.

For the Steiner teacher, the child's rich pictorial imagination is at the heart all their knowing (until age fourteen when they become able to deal with abstractions).³² Their understandings of the world should be left open, and they should not be bogged down in fixed and static concepts. They should be able to think in relation to what they experience, not dogma they are told. In telling a vivid story of Norse myths, the teacher is calling on a vivid pictorial imagination that is free (or relatively free) from the fixed concepts of justice and truth we assume today. So this lesson does seem achieve its goals.

But this lesson remains troubling because of its singularity. This makes it less likely to work, to make sense, in the times and places children might find themselves. Children are being taught a past that they cannot relate to, of people who were differently educated. They are encouraged to use one type of imagination only when thinking about the past—a passive visual imagination. This is a past and an imagination difficult to relate to a non-Steiner world and to the future.

For the State school teacher, Mary, who appears in my second and third stories, imagination is made more multiple. Children are encouraged to imagine in various ways for various reasons. A key factor in her account of imagination is the belief that she was not imaginative herself as a child, and this made her unable to deal as effectively as she might with the personal challenges she has faced in her own life. So she wants to give the children she teaches more power over their lives than she feels she has had. For her, as in VELs, imagination is a multiple and basic skill for effective acting in the future.³³

So now we can see these episodes in a different light. In the second story, Mary was modelling a bodily imagination that went forward and backward simultaneously, to make a past that is similar to the present in some ways (a place where people had beds and marked their houses) and different in others (beds can be more or less comfortable, houses marked by boots or letterboxes).³⁴ In this co-constitution of imagination and the past/future children were being taught to a) appreciate that things have changed for the better and b) generate new possibilities for using the past to generate further change.

In the third case, Mary was happy with a lesson that failed to generate empathy in the children, but did get them telling stories to their guest and expressing surprise at her appearance in the past. I, too, might now think of this in terms of children building a social relationship. And I might re-interpret what first seemed like rudeness as indicative of their recognition of the gap between themselves (and the present) and this woman (and the past). Watching these children relating themselves to this gap, being surprised and amused by change and difference, reminds me of the difficulty of communicating with others who have very different pasts. I am reminded that the past and imagining the past is an accomplishment.³⁵ Being able to call up and share personal and collective pasts with others is what we need to be able to do if we are to effectively go on together.

4. CONCLUSION

Now I shall draw things together. In this piece I have made several connected arguments, all to advance the claim that primary school history is less about teaching children to understand the past and more about teaching ways to act for the future. I have shown that this approach has been formalised in the epistemic shift from the 2000 CSF II to the 2006 VELs, and suggested that we describe this shift as a move from foundational empiricism to relational empiricism. Mapping it in this way, I argue, has three consequences.

First, as academic observers we are able to explain teachers' decisions and assessments in ways that give credit to them as experienced and skilful professionals. Second, it lets us focus on skills, concepts and orientations that are made alongside certain pasts. I have given an example of an episode of imagination and the future being remade. I have suggested some grounds on which we might judge whether imagination, past and future have been well served by the teacher, taking the teaching of multiple skills, concepts and orientations to be a positive. Finally, we need to teach pasts in ways that are accurate and sophisticated. But, more importantly, we need to be better able to recognise and prioritise those that enable the making of good futures.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Author field-notes, Year 4 classroom, Steiner school, 19 June 2007.
- 2 Author field-notes, Grade 3 and 4 classroom, State school, 22 May 2007.
- 3 Author field-notes, Grade 3 and 4 classroom, State school, 29 May 2007.
- 4 'SOSE: Introduction: Rationale', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/so/koso-g.htm>.
- 5 This attitude towards information technology was part of a national concern. It followed the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*, as did much else in this curriculum. *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*, quoted in 'Overview: The CSF II and national goals', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ov/ov-g.htm>.
- 6 For a critique of this way of conceiving good knowledge, see Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *Moral Passages: Towards a Collectivist Moral Theory*, Routledge, New York, 1994 (especially chapter 7, 'The knowers and the known'); Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *Impure Thoughts: Essays on Philosophy, Feminism and Ethics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1991 (especially chapter 6, 'Why philosophers should become sociologists').
- 7 Kwong Lee Dow and Sam Ball, 'CFS II, Overview: Foreword', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/so/koso-a.htm>.
- 8 The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* stated that Australia's students should leave school as 'confident, creative and productive users of new technologies, particularly information and communications technology'. 'Overview: The CSF II and national goals', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ov/ov-g.htm>.
- 9 For an example of the forms good citizenship was to take, see Australian Federal Department of Education, Science and Training and Australian Parents Council, *Values Education in Australian Schools: An Information Leaflet for the Parents of Non-Government School Students*, undated. For information on the Victorian context, see Australian Federal Department of Education, Science and Training, 'Values education for Australian schooling: States and Territories: Victoria', 2005, http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/val_victoria.8670.html. Values education was part of a complex public debate that associated history education with 'traditional schooling', knowledge of dates, and threatened by the co-opting of schooling by State Labour governments and Leftist teacher unions. See, for example, Editorial, 'Students left behind' and 'Letters to the editor', *Weekend Australian*, 7–8 October 2006, 16; Editorial, 'Little red curriculum', *Weekend Australian*, 14–15 October 2006, 18. For scholarly work on this debate, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2003; Anna Clark, *Teaching the Nation: Politics and Pedagogy in Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2006.
- 10 'LOTE: Introduction: Goals', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/lo/kolo-h.htm>; and 'SOSE: Introduction: Goals', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/so/koso-h.htm>.
- 11 Victorian Department for Education and Training, *Blueprint for Government Schools: Future Directions for Education in the Victorian Government School Sector*, 2004, 14.
- 12 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards: Overview*, March 2005, 4; and Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Introducing the Victorian Essential Learning Standards*, December 2004, 2.
- 13 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards: Overview*, March 2005, 1.
- 14 'Interdisciplinary Learning' lies alongside 'Discipline-Based Learning' (the transformed KLA) and 'Physical, Personal and Social Learning'.
- 15 'Languages Other than English: Introduction', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, State Government of Victoria, 2007, <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/essential/discipline/ote/index.html>.
- 16 'SOSE: Introduction: Rationale', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/so/koso-g.htm>.
- 17 'The Humanities: Introduction', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, State Government of Victoria, 2007, <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/essential/discipline/humanities/index.html>.
- 18 This contrast between knowledge of static structures to understandings of social dynamism is even clearer in the study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) history. It is a shift from looking at organisations and perspectives to understanding on-going practices. In CSF II the 'teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives enables students to develop a knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and its place in Australian history. It allows for an understanding of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have developed and adapted since European contact.' ('SOSE: Introduction: Inclusive Curriculum', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2002, <http://csf.vcaa.vic.edu.au/so/koso-j.htm>). Contrast that with VELS where students 'develop an understanding of traditional life encompassing social, political, economic and spiritual dimensions. They learn about the impact of, and response to, enforced change and the dynamism of current ATSI cultures.' ('History: Introduction', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, State Government of Victoria, 2007, <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/essential/discipline/humanities/history/index.html>.) The contrast is between, in CSF II, an ideal student who understands Aboriginal cultural *perspectives* and the up-to-date history of Aboriginal cultural structures and, in VELS, the student who understands Aboriginal *practices* in traditional and current cultures.
- 19 Students will be able to work towards a future which 'is sustainable – [this means] developing an understanding of the interaction between social, economic and environmental systems and how to manage them'. *Overview*, 4; *Introducing the VELS*, 2.
- 20 'Students learn to seek innovative alternatives and use their imagination to generate possibilities. They learn to take risks with their thinking and make new connections'. 'Thinking Processes: Introduction: Creativity', Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, State Government of Victoria, 2007, <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/essential/interdisciplinary/thinking/index.html#H2N1000B>.

- 21 Helen Verran, *Science and an African Logic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001; see also Helen Verran, 'The telling challenge of Africa's economies', *African Studies Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2007, 163–83.
- 22 Verran, *Science*, 34.
- 23 Just a few examples: O L Davis, Elizabeth Anne Yeager and Stuart J Foster (eds), *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2001; Roslyn Arnold, *Empathic Intelligence: Teaching, Learning, Relating*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2005; David Stockley, 'Empathetic reconstruction in history and history teaching', *History and Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1983, 50–65; Tony Boddington, 'Empathy and the teaching of history', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1980, 13–19; Stuart Foster, 'Using historical empathy to excite students about the study of history: Can you empathize with Neville Chamberlain?' *Social Studies*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1999, 18–24.
- 24 Verran, *Science*; Verran, 'The telling challenge'; Helen Verran, 'The educational value of explicit non-coherence: Software for helping Aboriginal children learn about place', in David W Kritt and Lucien T Winegar (eds), *Education and Technology: Critical Perspectives, Possible Futures*, Lanham, MD, Lexington, 2007, 101–124.
- 25 Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1983, 146.
- 26 Addelson, *Moral*; Addelson, *Impure*.
- 27 For a classic use of this concept to reveal the flaws in a social constructivist notion of reality, see Edward L Schieffelin, 'Performance and the cultural construction of reality', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1985, 707–724.
- 28 Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 29 Mol; Annemarie Mol and John Law, 'Regions, networks and fluids: Anaemia and social topography', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1994, 641–671; John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.
- 30 Author field-notes, Year 4 classroom, Independent School, 27 March 2007.
- 31 I understand that this is a very minimalist sense of truth and, given our subject matter, might cause offence to some readers. However, the actual truth or otherwise of this past is not what I want to focus on—instead I want to show the power of some accounts made in certain ways to affect the future.
- 32 Rudolf Steiner, *Education as a Social Problem; Six Lectures, Dornach, August 9–17, 1919*, Lisa D Monges and Doris M Bugbey (trans.), Anthroposophic Press, New York, 1969; A C Harwood, *The Recovery of Man in Childhood: A Study in the Educational Work of Rudolf Steiner*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958.
- 33 Author interview with J I, government school teacher, 29 May 2007.
- 34 This imagination enables the human bodily present to act as a 'boundary object', 'both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites'. Susan Star, *Regions of the Mind: Brain Research and the Quest for Scientific Certainty*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1989, 21.
- 35 As Sam Wineburg puts it, 'achieving mature historical thought depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to

traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past.' Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2001, 5.