

Social Imagination and History Teaching: Critical Thinking's Possibilities in the Australian Curriculum

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Abstract : This paper examines how critical thinking is framed, especially for primary-school students, in the recently established Australian Curriculum: History. Critical thinking is one of the curriculum's 'general capabilities.' History provides numerous opportunities for critical thinking's application in everyday life. The so-called 'history wars' that took place just prior to the curriculum's introduction in 2014 sought to bring to light the limits of a singular historical narrative and reveal that which had been repressed. Consequently, the Australian history curriculum reflects this shifting mindset. Teachers are presented with opportunities to treat history in the classroom as a repository of social possibility, especially related to democratic potential, beyond hackneyed and jingoistic tales of Australian nationhood. Yet such opportunities are not explicit within the document and are up against pre-existing pedagogic practices. Drawing on political thinker Cornelius Castoriadis's rendering of the 'social-historical' and 'paidea,' as well as his mobilisation of psychoanalysis, the study outlines how the curriculum's critical-thinking component opens up possibilities for students and teachers to revise assumptions about how history is understood. This ontological shift is ultimately creative: the teachers' imaginations connect the students' imaginations, and vice versa, to the analysis that is at the heart of historical thinking. The implications of this social imagination add to the current discussions about historical consciousness among scholars like Peter Seixas. But, importantly, it has practical application in the primary-school classroom where history becomes creative acts, like play, that is indeterminate and social rather than fixed and individual.

Keywords : Australia, Castoriadis, critical thinking, history, imagination

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