

## Do we still need a National Curriculum?

There is a good argument that there should be a substantial body of knowledge and skills that every child should be entitled to. The current National Curriculum has been a poor and destructive method of trying to achieve this and has constituted a negative and restricting factor, inhibiting pedagogic innovation and critical thinking.

One argument made in favour of the National Curriculum was that, when families moved and children changed school, the children would be able to fit into the new school more easily because everybody their age would be more or less at the same place in the programme of study. This presupposes that every school would follow the elements of the Programme of Study in exactly the same order but this was rarely the case. Discovering what a mid-term entrant knew and did not know had no easy formulaic solution. Most of the reliable information about the new child was what the teacher discovered for him/herself.

The National Curriculum, with its arbitrary hierarchies of subject knowledge, was primarily a tool to support inspection and monitoring and had the (undeclared) intention of giving people without specialist knowledge a superficial grasp of what was happening in the classroom. It also allocated numerical levels to specific pieces of knowledge creating an entirely ungrounded “value-system” within a subject area and establishing an even more specious equality of arbitrary pieces of knowledge between subject areas. What, for example, was the ground for equivalence between being able “to identify all the symmetries of two dimensional shapes” (Mathematics Level 5) and being able to “cope with language spoken at near normal speed in everyday circumstances that has little or no interference or hesitancy [*sic*]” (Modern Foreign Languages Level 5) This in turn led to children being ascribed National Curriculum levels and being expected to progress through levels (an idea based on simplistic reading of Piaget) even though it is well documented that individual children have individual responses to subject matter and do not experience the same facility or difficulty within all parts of a subject.

There is, however, a strong case for defining a **curricular entitlement** that details what, ideally, every child should know by the time he or she leaves school. (What age should this be?) This of course is no easy task since any approach to a minimal canon of subjects and experiences necessarily excludes valuable areas of human endeavour and understanding and a comprehensive curriculum is self-evidently impossible, even within the confines of a single subject. It would then be up to each school to organise an appropriate route to providing the entitlement – a route that reflected its own expertise and the contextual background and needs of its intake.

What every teacher or subject department should do is plan the scheme of work that is to be taught employing whatever resources, local facilities and local knowledge that seem appropriate to the local students. Many people who were educated under the National Curriculum and then became teachers now find this kind of planning very difficult although it should be a basic skill of the profession.

How should such an entitlement be worked out? A national working party would have to be established based on the various social groupings that clearly have an interest in getting it right. The right balance of stakeholders (government, academia, subject teachers' associations, schools, commerce/industry, parents, children, and who else?) would be difficult but the body would need to have a continuing and democratically constituted existence so as to keep the situation under regular review. The examination system would focus on how well the entitlement had been achieved by the student but should be subject to the same independent, i.e. non-privatised, inspection and monitoring regime as schools and the middle tier authority.

### **If we do, should it apply to all state funded schools?**

A National Curriculum has no meaning unless it represents an entitlement for all children. All state funded schools should teach it.

### **What is the proper place of political decision making, professional decision making at a national level and school/teacher decision making about the curriculum?**

Children's educational entitlement should be worked out at a national level but the routes taken to achieve it should be devised at school level.

### **Since 1988, the National Curriculum has been made up of programmes in particular subjects. Is this the best way to determine the content of the curriculum? If not, how else could it be done? For example, is it practical to derive a curriculum from a statement of overall aims?**

Programmes of study have been restrictive and superficial. The determination to make one model fit all subject areas has led in some instances, Design and Technology being one of the extreme examples, of a subject being presented in a way that bears no relation to its real world use and value. Competence in any subject and the ability to pursue it independently come from in depth study that incorporates process and critical thinking as well as content. Content alone merely qualifies the student to give correct answers in pub quizzes. A statement of overall aims for the end of education would be a more effective and empowering way to establish a National Curriculum but the format would look very different for different subjects.

### **Should all curriculum areas (however defined) be compulsory up to 14? If so, how much flexibility should there be for schools and how can a National Curriculum be designed which ensures that there is space for that?**

The minimum entitlement to 14 should be compulsory. Within the typical limits of the school day from age 5 to age 14 space should be left for schools to introduce their own enhancements.

## **How can a National Curriculum support the development of things like personal qualities and attitudes and dispositions? Or should the curriculum restrict itself to knowledge and skills?**

Personal qualities, attitudes and dispositions reflect the ethos of the school and the extent to which equal opportunities and mutual respect is genuinely reflected in the daily life of the school – the collegiate nature of the staff and the absence of streaming or setting. No teaching can instil good personal qualities and attitudes if the daily life of the school teaches a completely different story. (Cf. trying to teach healthy eating in Biology or Food technology lessons while the school permits the sale and consumption of junk food on its premises.)

## **How should the National Curriculum set out the material to be covered – i.e. what should programmes of study, attainment targets etc. look like. How detailed should they be – should some areas be more detailed than others?**

There should not be programmes of study. If the end entitlements of students are defined clearly enough, it should be the responsibility of the schools themselves to plan their pathways to the end targets. These pathways should be clearly documented year on year and term by term and subject to monitoring and inspection (by the middle tier and HMI) but they should also reflect the school's environment and the needs of its intake.

## **Is there a case for changing the current key stage structure - e.g. the EY/ KS1 border, the Y4/5 border, the KS3/KS4 border?**

Key stages were invented to assist testing and monitoring. At what age should children start school? At what age should children transfer from primary to secondary school? At what age should students begin preparing in earnest for their final examinations. There is probably not much to be gained from changing the borders.

## **What should be the required elements of a common curriculum at Key Stage 4?**

Balance. Between arts and sciences, between practical and theoretical. There is a tendency to overspecialise and narrow down the areas of experience at Key Stage 4. This of course is encouraged by the need in subject areas for greater depth. One example of the outside pressures pushing children into specialising too early has been the move away from balanced science and the re-emergence of triple science (physics, chemistry and biology). A better solution would be to extend the compulsory school age so that premature specialisation could become easier to resist.

## **What kinds of vocational courses and qualifications are appropriate at Key Stage 4?**

The labels vocational and (presumably) academic should not be used. Vocational, in particular, tends to be used as a pejorative value judgement for subjects considered to be preparation for low status employment but the education required to become a medical doctor or lawyer is just as much vocational although it tends to be considered as academic i.e. high status. There are strong arguments in favour of everybody learning practical skills throughout their school career (PE, metalwork, woodwork, cooking, art, music) even if they are not examined in them. Literacy and numeracy are everybody's entitlement and continuing to develop these in context should continue throughout schooling.

## **Is there a case for radical change of assessment at 16+? If so what might an alternative look like?**

There is a case for consistency of standards and performance between examination boards. While they remain private, external, independent and not for profit monitoring of their standards is essential.

## **Given that parents and the wider public now expect to have a lot of information about schools, how can we measure what schools are achieving for their pupils without narrowing the curriculum through “teaching to the test”?**

If measuring means ascribing a limited number of numerical values to a school to satisfy public curiosity, its consequences will always be destructive. A school is best judged over time by people with knowledge and experience. That is a clear rôle for the missing “middle tier” whose performance would need monitoring by an expanded and independent HMI.

**How do you react to the proposals from the government's review panel in relation to:**

**The aims of the curriculum?**

**Its approach to assessment, reporting and progression?**

**Its redefinition of Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets?**

**Do you agree with the Secretary of State and HMCI that expectations for age 11 should be higher than at present?**

Expectations should always be higher. The issue is that improvements are more likely to come from advice and support than from punitive public excoriation.