

NAPE Spring Conference February 2013

Michael Gove's proposals for the National Curriculum (NC 2014 – esp core subjects)

Introduction (Colin Richards)

Highlighted five major problem areas:

- i) not broad and balanced
- ii) restricted teacher creativity and innovation
- iii) didn't understand that children learn in different ways and need different kinds of 'scaffolding'
- iv) didn't understand there are a variety of ways to assess progress (including testing when appropriate)
- v) politicians' distrust of profession (e.g. prescribing curriculum in single or double year-groups)

Responses and discussion

TW suggested further key problems:

- a) little attempt to make it *age appropriate* – will encourage *rote learning* rather than reasoning, so poor foundation
- b) an *assembly kit* view of learning (the whole via the parts) – take your rules (of phonics, grammar etc.) and an Allen key then you'll become a good writer (esp. English)
- c) *bled dry of experience* - tends to regard abstract symbols as sufficient, rather than learning by relating symbolic representations with sensory experience and experimental and creative activity
- d) extent of *detail* in English and Maths makes it difficult to develop the key skills in *meaningful contexts*, including other curriculum areas (science, humanities etc.)

These problems will produce early sense of *failure*, and will mean end product is a dumbing down, not the standard-raising Gove claims.

Other participants made reference to a failure to build on Cambridge Primary Review, Rose, or adapt Pring's concepts to primary stage. Also Symposium on Sustainable Schools; Michael Bassey and other professors' open letter Nov 2012

Gove's claim to follow model of high-achieving countries / states was highly questionable.

English (Barbara Conridge, NATE)

English is always contentious:

language at centre of everything (personal identity, national identity, value as a person);

varieties of English (whose English? who says what English is? class, Standard, ethnic varieties);

politicians are literature, were successful learners, ideas of how they learnt (in elite schools) and about what children should learn.

Sec. of State claims a mission – raise standards, incl. international.

Key issues:

Reading

- i) highly prescriptive, esp. earlier years – appendices are statutory
- ii) no speaking and listening sections – entirely subsumed in literacy; not for own sake; limited focus esp. formal presentational speech in Standard English
- iii) reading split into word reading and comprehension, nothing else, with one method statutory (synthetic phonics) – Y1 only allowed to read books entirely based on phonics. (until Y3-5 when word reading almost disappears)
- iv) traditional forms – no reference to web pages, visual literacy etc. (except Y6 learn to write an email address correctly)
- v) false expectations of young children e.g. Y1 apostrophe of omission.

Positives: enjoy reading, wide range of texts, comprehension

Writing

divided into transcription (spelling, handwriting) and composition (grammar)

writing process includes the right elements (purpose, audience, form; editing; reading texts as a model for writing)

Y2 example – use role play to develop ideas.

However:

- i) inexperienced teachers or those lacking in autonomy will overfocus on spelling lists etc.
- ii) technical details and difficulties introduced much earlier than normal, which will be an inhibiting factor for many children

Other issues:

- i) density of PoS – leading to imbalance
- ii) simplistic high-stakes assessment (phonic test, KS2 SPAG) will drive curriculum
- iii) no consideration of 21st Century context
- iv) excessive lists (spellings, grammar, etc.) which don't relate to the child's use of language.

Mathematics (Tony Cotton, ATM / Maths Assoc Pr Gp)

Their panels felt nobody listened at DfE. Lots of visits from Stefano Potsi, were asked to suggest somebody to help with redraft, but nothing seemed to change.

Everything had to fit government agenda / priorities. Were consulted on content only, not what we think mathematics is and how it is practised.

Key issues:

- i) the content is there, but a particular pedagogy is also defined in detail – would have been better to omit this.
- ii) lots of things children won't be able to do – the notion that you raise standards by bringing forward to Y4 what you did in Y6, etc. e.g. coordinates in 4 quadrants, compound measures such as speed into KS2)
- iii) focus on acquisition of techniques through frequent practice, but problem solving deferred till later
- iv) assumption that practice will lead to fluency – fluency defined without a thought to understanding
- v) no introduction of algebraic thinking until Y6 when it is introduced as formal notation and rules
- vi) a lack of aims (reasoning / line of enquiry; solve problems, develop concepts; enjoyment, curiosity)

High performing countries (DfE used Massachusetts and Singapore) misrepresented.

Levels removed, but concern at what will replace them – a new 'year zero'.

Consultation limited, once more, to 'help government implement its policies', not on the policies themselves.

Science (Annette Smith, ASE)

Science more fortunate, some of its objections to the first draft taken on board due to involvement of science associations (Royal Society etc. via SCORE) in DfE STEM agenda - they supported ASE as a source of expertise on education in schools. However, ASE only given a fortnight to improve draft.

Several justifications (Prof Robin Miller, 2012) for science in schools:

- economic (which government understand)
- utility
- democratic
- cultural

Also DfE has supported the idea of developing excitement and curiosity about natural phenomena (as if children don't have that). Gove's view seems to be 'teach the laws etc.' (speech 5.2.13)

The downgrading of primary science by removing them from KS2 SATs is overcome.

The changes from the earlier draft include:

- tone and content
- removal of inaccuracies
- guidance notes revised
- slimmed down content (fewer magnets)
- emphasis on 'working scientifically'

BUT

- no decisions yet on *assessment – fear that this will have damaging effect*

“Not a silk purse but no longer a sow's ear.”

Worries:

lack of consistency across different NC subjects

current threats to ITE / CPD will limit teachers' capacity

assessment

no thought to creative cross-curricular teaching

no sense of progression (e.g. failure to carry through early years principles to primary and secondary)

disconnect of the KS3 curriculum

overload.

In response to questions, ASE had been heavily focused on sorting out problems of content and not really had the time to evaluate:

- whether it was *age appropriate*
- whether it could be covered within allocated hours, without restricting other subjects and without *descending into summary rote learning*

Andrew Pollard

The Consultation document claims to set out 'only the essential knowledge and understanding... and leave teachers to decide how to teach' and 'to be a benchmark not a straitjacket'

'It will be slim, clear and authoritative enough for all parents to see what their child might be expected to know at every stage in their school career'.

BUT

does not establish legitimacy of over-arching aims;

overspecifies core subjects and embeds pedagogic prescription (200 pages, no room for anything more)

other foundation subjects are incoherent in form and content

lacks balance in knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes

is weak in continuity from EY to KS1

will make differentiation difficult

has no sense of *learning*

weak on pupil agency, engagement, etc

weak curricular coherence

assessment requirements are unclear, but likely to be very powerful

will make it difficult, given systemic control factors, for schools to 'rise above the straitjacket'

A systematic evaluation against accepted concepts (breadth and balance, etc.) (acknowledged other criteria possible, e.g. psychology of development and learning). based on Pollard 2010: Professionalism and pedagogy: a contemporary opportunity

downloaded from www.tlrp.org, or go to www.reflectiveteaching.co.uk/deepeningexpertise.

1. Breadth (aims, subjects and areas of learning)

2. Balance (between knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes)
3. Continuity, progression and expectation
4. Personalisation (incl. connection, relevance, differentiation)
5. Agency (incl. engagement, dialogue, authenticity and feedback)
6. Coherence and congruence

Essential to combine *knowledge and learning* (as TLRP, and as Plowden did despite misrepresentation as purely ‘child centred’). According to TLRP, you need a balance between engagement with valued knowledge, and taking account of what the learner already know (prior learning but also personal and cultural experiences of different groups of learners.) This proposal emphasises knowledge but not learning – children are absent. How to do both is the enduring dilemma of curriculum design.

Major issues of:

- reconciling coherence and progression in subject knowledge, with making connections to children’s lives
- reconciling guarantee of entitlement with enabling teachers to exercise judgement and respond to particular learning needs.

One victory is that overall aim (spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical etc. 2002 Act, origins 1944 Act) is retained, but this is not linked to the subject aims or detail. (The Expert Panel challenged Gove to a public debate on the aims of education, but was rejected.)

Process of developing NC 2014:

driven by feeling that school system is underperforming, that high performing systems combine high levels of autonomy with high levels of accountability...

core

emphasis on ‘knowledge’ (Hirsch), based on trawl of high-achieving jurisdictions, result: detailed core content, with progression often problematic)

uneasy relationship with subject representatives

reliance on special advisers (incognito), dinner parties – undemocratic.

other foundation

high knowledge content but short, variable, unedited, merges upper and lower KS2 no heed to age or progression; random areas emphasized (history; food – Jamie Oliver; programming) – no principles.

1 Breadth

All high performing countries have breadth, not just ‘core’ (DfE 2011, from INCA comparative international study)

Inspection reports for decades have emphasized that breadth aids high standards in core – other subjects provide a stimulating content to talk, read and write about, and explore mathematically, scientifically, socially or creatively (Expert Panel 2011)

see also Cambridge Primary Review, Alexander 2011 (submission to DfE) says unsound and counter productive to narrow down the curriculum in the hope of raising standards in ‘basics’

Alexander 15.3.11 letter to Guardian argued there are two versions of ‘minimal entitlement’, just defining the core and reducing statutory content in other subjects to essentials. This gave the appearance of 2, but the reality of 1 (i.e. other subjects will be neglected).

Essential that there should be public debate, as first step in curriculum formation, of ‘broad areas of intention such as social, economic, personal, cultural, environmental’. No possible to achieve coherence without clarity on goals. (Expert Panel report 2011)

variable quality of curriculum for ‘other foundation’ subjects

2 Balance

- *Balance* in the sense of HMI 1985 Elements of Learning, knowledge / concepts / skills / attitudes etc.
- *Concepts* Concepts, as organisers, anchorage points, for flexible futures, avoid long lists of content. There has been no attempt to identify key concepts e.g. the Geographical Association’s list to aid

‘thinking geographically (place, space, environment; connection, interrelation, scale, change). Instead of foundations we have a list of information (names of rivers, capitals etc.). Concepts are sometimes implicit, lurking in the background in core, but absent in most other, though mentioned in history. Seem to be regarded by politicians and advisers as suspect.

- *Skills* Skill is ‘capacity to perform a task’. These have been even more suspect (esp. Nick Gibb), though they are key in high attaining countries esp. cognitive skills. Some lurk in the background e.g. in generic section, but not explicit in core subjects and some other foundation. Emphasis on skills of speaking, literacy, numeracy for all subjects – but no provision for learning skills, etc.
- *Attitudes* Another omission (e.g. Claxton: resilience, resourceful) or Gilbert (2007) 2020 Vision.

NB Pollard had suggested using concepts rather than lists of content, but this was ignored.

184 pp altogether: 138pp on KS1-2 core; 15pp on KA-2 other; 31pp on KS3 core and foundation. Why?

3 Continuity /progression / expectations.

No continuity within other foundation subjects.

There are various ways of mapping progression e.g. Bloom’s Taxonomy; a sequence of knowledge.

Instead, we have a mixture harvested from high-achieving countries, with a deliberate exaggeration of what children can be expected to do at a particular age. Under the rhetoric of ‘high expectations’, it will result in a sense of failure at all levels, including the failure of state schools. Pitching demands beyond zone of proximal development makes the intention to ‘raise standards’ unrealistic and oppressive.

We need high expectations, e.g. ‘Learning without limits’ (overcoming notion of fixed ability) but you have to pitch things right, or there will be failure and a sense of failure. Ministers should take this very seriously if they are to avoid accusations of artificially trying to lay a trap for teachers and, more importantly, of mass-producing pupil ‘failure’ by pitching curriculum expectations unrealistically. Labelling of children’s struggle to understand as ‘failure’ is likely to produce disengagement and, ultimately, resistance. To tie children into learning, they have to be enabled to progressively succeed.

In the other foundation subjects, vague.

No continuity from EYFS aspects or learning characteristics.

4 Personalisation

A new and vague concept, but suggesting close attention to the learner – no mention of this. It’s based on appropriate assessment.

The school curriculum should be seen as a space where personalisation can be developed if teachers are allowed. At its best, it includes a sense of connection to children’s existing knowledge and to community knowledge and cultures.

5 Agency (engagement, relevance, differentiation)

In Gove’s curriculum, knowledge is disembodied and decontextualised.

Some teachers will succeed in making the connections to learners, but the curriculum and related accountability processes will be a pressure not to. Disengagement is disproportionately concentrated among children from poorer backgrounds, because school learning doesn’t make connections with other parts of their lives. CPR, RSA and EP have all suggested making provision for locally based curricula. Curriculum core should be bounded and not take up disproportionate time.

Relevance

the question of whether the curriculum is meaning to children – ignored. (see John Holt: Learning to Fail, for the importance)

Differentiation

learners' prior knowledge, Assessment for Learning, etc.

Agency

active participation of the learners, as:

- i) engagement
- ii) dialogue.

Only found one mention in Science, and a generic statement re language and literacy but not picked up in PoS.

Authenticity, personal meaningfulness, feedback?

Absence of success criteria which can be shared with the learner (see Hattie).

Occasional relevance of notes and guidance, which smuggle in pedagogic ideas.

No use constantly repeating 'high expectations'.

The point is that having a general commitment to supporting the progress of every child is an enabling condition which needs to be followed up with differentiated tasks and other appropriate activities which meet their particular needs, including matched cognitive challenge. This is more precise than simply 'expecting' them to perform. Expectations work through personal relationships, institutional and classroom cultures and, not least, through expert, differentiated and personalised teaching.

Whilst England organises its subject knowledge, OECD and many other countries are paying increasing attention to learning per se. This slide is a simple illustration of this fact from a recent OECD review of international evidence.

6 Coherence... Congruence? No attempt at coherence across subjects.
Should start from the aims.

Accountability system

This creates a further distorting effect. For example, testing such as SPAG test will distort use of time.

Inspection scarcely mentions curriculum, except briefly under teaching and leadership.

At the classroom level, the search for coherence and congruence will be undermined by the accountability pressure, the load of attainment targets, etc. so most teachers will simply follow the book and teach a narrow curriculum.

David Hogan's 2013 analysis of Singapore: pedagogy largely performative – Singapore government now struggling to overcome this.

The key features of Singapore's performative pedagogy include a determined focus on curriculum coverage, knowledge transmission and exam preparation for national high stakes assessments; a strong inclination for teachers to 'teach to the test'; fidelity of task implementation to task design; pragmatic, fit-for-purpose instructional choices that are largely indifferent to theoretical background but generally focus on techniques drawn from direct instruction and traditional instruction (worksheets, textbooks, drill and practice); a pervasive and authoritative ability discourse; a preponderance of closed questions, limited exchanges and performative talk during lessons.

(Hogan et al, 2013)

Beware of Consultation Questions, which distort critical issues and prevent meaningful criticism. e.g.

Q2: Do you agree that instead of detailed subject-level aims we should free teachers to shape their own curriculum aims based on the content in the programmes of study?

General discussion

Richard Pring's framework for upper secondary relevant at other stages:

- aims
- relevance (not just to academic)
- realistic optimism
- humane purposive assessment
- respect for teachers' judgement
- collaboration no competition
- restore education as a public service

Disrespect for teachers (Tony Eade)

Need for a broad coalition (Mick Brookes, NAHT)

Relevance of the four guidance principles of the Foundation Stage

Learn from Mid Staffs health authority: review highlighted how a target culture led to ticklist mentality and lack of compassion.

Deep problems: nature of knowledge [cf information, data]; nature of learners.

Teacher's skill is relating knowledge to learners, require attention to age, emotional, cognitive capacity, needs, interests. It will take enormous professionalism at school level to overcome the faults of NC2014 and turn it into a half-decent curriculum-as-taught.

Alliances: various speakers suggested (i) CBI; (ii) Women's Institute

Tactics? One suggestion:

develop stronger aims, including how to learn

rebalance breadth by improving on foundation subjects

challenge the pitch of expectations

BUT defer major debate on aims until education is in safer hands than Gove's.

(M Armstrong) Knowledge and children – this curriculum ignores children and their agency.

suggests we reread Dewey's short essay 'My pedagogic creed'.

(Eade) need a broad coalition – churches, employers, governors, etc.

areas of concern:

- i) education for world they are going to live in – knowledge economy needs more skills and cognition, less memorisation of data
- ii) breadth and balance
- iii) ways of working e.g. as a scientist
- iv) overload leading to rote learning, surface without depth
- v) impact on children – stress, failure.

ASE asked: is Sc curr preparing for the future?

If we don't stress overload and unrealistic expectations, they will say teachers incompetent.