

## **A RE-REVISED CODE FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY ? A personal response to the publication of the government's proposals for the primary curriculum**

**Colin Richards**

Most of us accept the need for a review of the primary curriculum and most agree that any revised curriculum should be informed by high expectations. However, the proposed new programmes of study for mathematics, English and science raise important general issues including the exercise of professional judgement, the breadth and balance of the proposed curriculum, the justification for the content proposed; and the relationship between the curriculum, inspection and assessment. Such issues are fundamentally more important than the specifics of curriculum content and need wider discussion between the government and the teaching profession. The issues highlighted in this editorial are not in order of importance. However, their successful resolution is essential for the education and well-being of primary age children and to the professional effectiveness of their teachers.

A first concern is the rigidity associated with specifying content by year-group which, especially in those schools fearful of the consequences of only partial compliance or of the exercise of professional initiative, would deny or, at the very least severely discourage, the exercise of flexible judgement by teachers in the light of their knowledge of the children in their own classes. This discouragement would be compounded if it was believed, rightly or wrongly, the Ofsted inspection regime and the national assessment system mirrored, or cohered with, the expectations in the new curriculum. A century ago Edmond Holmes, a former HM Chief Inspector, characterised the elements of a yearly syllabus as "absurdities" that would be "merely so much by-play in the evolution of a drama which is a grotesque blend of tragedy and farce." How "tragic" would it be for our children if they were required to learn -presumably by rote- material that they cannot understand? How "farical" it would be if teachers felt constrained to keep higher-attaining pupils in lock-step with their peers when they could move on in their understanding? How "grotesque" if all pupils of a certain age were required to spell a word like "grotesque"?!

A second issue is the in-built disincentive to innovation and experiment which would result from schools adhering to these high specific prescriptions since many would fear that departing from them would be perilous given the likely inspection regime. Again, Edmond Holmes presciently captured the weaknesses of this government's conservative approach to curriculum design and review::

"Were the government to entrust the drafting of schemes of work in the various subjects to a committee of the wisest and most experienced educationalists in England, the resultant syllabus would be a dismal failure. For in framing those schemes these wise and experienced educationalists would find themselves compelled to take account of the lowest rather than the highest level of actual educational achievement. What is exceptional and experimental cannot possibly find a place in a syllabus which is to bind all schools and teachers alike."

Teacher creativity and professional judgement would be put at risk in schools subject to the new highly prescriptive requirements. "Exceptional and experimental" practice would be discouraged and perhaps found only in free schools or academies unfettered by the detailed new requirements.

Third, while all of us involved in primary education acknowledge the importance of English, mathematics and science, the proposals would massively reinforce the narrow focus on these three subjects as *the* core subjects of the primary curriculum. The other subjects (including a possible compulsory foreign language) would remain in a vague way part of the official primary curriculum but accorded very much second class status and marginalised through far less detailed, probably minimal, prescription. How would genuine breadth and balance in the curriculum to be offered pupils? How much time would be left over for the arts, humanities and physical education once the

detailed “ScEM” specifications and foreign language requirements had been met? How would squeezing non-core subjects into tightly constrained time allocations allow for what the government calls “the maximum level of innovation at school level in the development of content in these areas”? Would that “maximum level” paradoxically leave schools “free” to do almost nothing, beyond, token recognition of these subjects?

Fourth, that pre-eminence of the “ScEM” subjects would be reinforced by new assessment arrangements which, though mercifully to be freed from highly problematic “levels”, are likely to be highly constraining on teachers, children and Ofsted inspectors alike. The details of new-style “grading” tests and of the year-groups to be tested are yet to be specified but the resultant arrangements could well be even more burdensome and pervasive than the current regime.

Fifth, there is the issue of the bases on which these decisions about content specification have been taken. What is the rationale for particular prescriptions? Are they based on academic advice, studies of child development, research, “competitor” countries’ syllabuses, international test items, experience from the independent sector, Ofsted inspection, selected practitioners’ experience, politicians’ prejudices or what? The headline announcements about grammar, spelling and multiplication tables hint strongly at the last of these as one major source. But a more rational foundation would be to arrive at decisions made by subject experts and expert practitioners based on interaction of subject knowledge, pedagogic subject knowledge and knowledge of individual development.

Sixth, these proposals are premised on a Victorian view of teachers as essentially transmitters of subject content, not as agents working with pupils in the co-construction of understanding and the development of personal capability, both of which involve but go beyond mastery of subject content.

The proposals represent the most detailed prescription placed on primary schools since the abolition of the Revised Code at the end of the nineteenth century. In many respects they are regressive and demeaning, rather than enabling and enhancing the understanding of children and the practice of teachers. Along with the government’s prescriptions for the teaching of early reading they represent the most severe attack yet on the profession of primary teaching.

Rather than being refined as a result of the informal and formal consultations the proposed curriculum needs to be rejected in its current form and radically reformulated as a result of a more broadly-based review. The future of the primary curriculum and the education of our children are too important to be subject to short-term political priorities informed by personal predilection.

