

Some reflections on the Secretary of State for Education's proposed National Curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2

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International comparisons: PISA

The Secretary of State for Education is rightly concerned about England's declining performance in the PISA tests. Unfortunately his response is likely to reinforce inherited problems and accelerate the decline.

The decline from 2000 to 2009 is not quite as severe as Mr Gove presents, as some of the countries which scored higher than England in 2009 had not been participants in 2000. It is however highly significant: leaving the newcomers aside, out of the 32 participating countries in 2000 England fell by 2009 from 8th to 20th in reading, 9th to 19th in maths, and 4th to 10th in science. In reading and maths the fall was from around the upper quartile to the half-way mark. The more modest fall in science may be partly due to science being a core subject from the start of primary school in England, unlike other countries.

The particular significance of PISA, compared with other national and international tests, is its emphasis on holistic and critical thinking when reading texts and the application of mathematical and scientific understanding to realistic situations and problems. It is the acquisition of cognitive ability which has suffered a decline.

There are signs that this begins in primary school. Adey and Shayer (King's College London) have discovered that children are much less able to solve basic Piagetian scientific problems despite rising SAT scores: the science KS2 tests are very amenable to cramming, being largely based on memorising facts – a practice which is encouraged by the high stakes attached to these tests. Hilton (Cambridge University) demonstrated how KS2 tests in reading were modified in the late 1990s to reduce the emphasis on reading between the lines, leaving mainly literal fact-spotting. Whether or not this was deliberate, it produced the illusion that the previous government's literacy hour was a great success, though pupils were not in fact well prepared for the more complex literacies required for academic success in secondary education.

Unfortunately the curriculum proposed by Secretary of State Michael Gove misses the point: that young people in England are memorising a great deal of information in schools but not, for the most part, learning how to *think* better. It emphasizes above all else the accumulation of information rather than properly integrated understanding and the intelligent application of knowledge.

Despite the rhetoric of 'raising standards', the Secretary of State's proposal seriously risks dumbing down education in English primary schools.

Micro-management and deprofessionalisation

There is a further danger in the degree of micro-management represented by these documents, which come closer in genre to a scheme of work than to a National Curriculum. This level of prescription might make it easier for classes to be directed by less qualified and lower paid staff such as classroom assistants. However, it also has the effect of deprofessionalising the teaching role.

This is in continuity, but an intensification, of a problem which has been present for some years. In the early 1990s government officials began to speak of teachers 'delivering' the curriculum. This metaphor of *delivery* suggests a simple process of transmission of information. By contrast a professional view of teaching involves a thoughtful mediation, and particularly in more disadvantaged schools: how to build on pupils' prior knowledge, how to connect with their prior experience and lead them through a learning process to engage with established academic knowledge and extend their horizons of understanding.

The level of detail of the proposed National Curriculum risks turning teachers into the kwikfit fitters of education.

It is interesting to make some comparisons with Finland's national curriculum which is different in its level of specificity but also in terms of focus. Rather than listing detailed objectives it speaks of educational aims and processes in pedagogical terms. It shows a rich understanding of teaching as a civilising process rather than simply a technical one. Here are some examples from the section about mother-tongue teaching (Finnish).

Stating the central aims:

The fundamental task... is to spark the pupil's interest in language, literature and interaction.... It must be based on a community-oriented view of language... founded on the pupil's linguistic and cultural skills and experience, and must offer opportunities for diversified communication, reading, and writing, through which the pupil builds his or her identity and self-esteem. The objective is that the pupil becomes an active and ethically responsible communicator and reader who gets involved in culture and participates in and influences society...

They acquire not simply means of analysing reality but also possibilities to break loose from reality, to construct new worlds and connect things to new contexts...

Readers will note that, unlike the English proposal, the Finnish document relates literacy to spoken language, and elsewhere to information technology and media literacy. Language in all these forms is seen as part of social interaction, culture, human development, democracy and creativity.

When the document deals with particular stages, there is some more detail but nothing like the prescription in the English document. For example, Grades 1-2 (a similar age to our Years 2 and 3, since Finnish schools begin later; children start learning to read through more informal processes in the pre-school, when English children are in reception or Year 1).

Interaction:

The pupils will learn to ask and answer questions, and to relate their own knowledge, experiences, thoughts, and opinions...

Reworking of things heard, seen, experienced, and read, with the help of improvisation, narration, play and drama, integrating these skills into other artistic subjects, too

Literacy:

The pupils will learn the basic techniques of reading and writing, and the concepts that are necessary in that learning... learn gradually to take into account conventions of written language when writing their own texts... word recognition, progressing from short words towards long, unfamiliar ones; introduction to and application of strategies that improve text comprehension.

Readers will notice, for example, that asking questions is as important as answering the teacher's questions, and that there is a strong orientation to reception as an aid to expression. Language use is seen as a creative process, not in the 'lone Romantic' sense but in terms of a *reworking* of experience and texts involving playful means such as improvisation and story-telling. Learning *about* language, which has a dominant role in the proposed English curriculum and is almost an end in itself, is in the Finnish document age-appropriate, gradual and purposeful. The text does not legislate on detail, but it certainly invokes high standards: indeed, 'strategies that improve text comprehension' points to higher levels of reading ability than in the English document.

Finnish schools do not give grades at this stage, they do not divide children up in to more and less able, they do not use blanket tests and tell young children they have failed, though they do use sample assessments in order to discreetly identify schools which need some collegial support to improve. Again the guidance is framed in more general and more positive form:

Description of good performance at end of second grade

are able to express themselves in writing, too, so as to enable them to cope with writing situations in their own daily lives: they will also be able to use imagination in their writing

are able to connect letters when writing by hand, and to produce original text on a computer

are able to write simple and familiar words almost without error and have begun to use terminal punctuation in sentences, and capital letters to begin sentences.

This contrasts with the level of prescription in the English document for the overlapping age group (Y3-4). This makes no mention of spoken communication other than in service to literacy (reading aloud, learning poetry by heart, discussing interesting words in a text). It presents lists of prefixes

and suffixes, spellings, tenses to be used, conjunctions to be learnt, and grammatical terminology which must be explicitly taught.

Finally, it is worth considering whether expectations in the English document are actually impossibly high, by comparison with the Finnish one which, after all, derives from one of the highest performing school systems in the world. The appendix for Years 3 and 4 (the equivalent of Finland's grades 2 and 3) specifies, for example:

in- becomes im- before m or p, e.g. immortal, impossible

in- becomes ir- before r, e.g. irregular, irrelevant

inter- means between or among, e.g. interact, interrelated

-tion and variants such as -sion, ssion, e.g. inflation, exception, confession, expansion

singular proper nouns ending in an s use s's e.g. Cyprus's population of boys'

grammatical terminology such as conjunction, adverb, subordinate clause.

As an academically successful pupil who went on to study European languages in the University of Cambridge, I recall being first taught these things in the early years of grammar school, not half way through primary.

We should also note that in Finland children who speak a different language at home are supported in becoming competently bilingual; it is recognized that language development takes time and as 8-year-olds they are explicitly *not* expected to match the performance in Finnish of first-language speakers.

Similar questions arise in connection with mathematics, where comparisons are perhaps more straightforward. The expectation at the end of Finland's grade 2 (England's Y3) is to 'know simple fractions, such as one half, one third and one quarter, and know how to present them by concrete means'. Their English counterparts are expected to 'identify, name and write unit fractions up to $1/12$... perform calculations with addition and subtraction of fractions with the same denominator within one whole (e.g. $5/7 + 1/7 = 6/7$)'. The Finnish pupils are expected to know terms such as triangle, circle, sphere and cube and the concept of angle; English children of the same age are required to use vocabulary such as polygon and polyhedron, distinguish acute and obtuse angles, and draw circles of different sizes with a given radius. Finnish children should 'know how to measure with simple measuring devices' whereas English children of the same age have to compare mixed units such as 1kg with 200g, or 5m with 500cm.

Not only are the English requirements more demanding, but they operate at a higher level of abstraction disconnected from their experience of physical reality, a process which the majority of children of this age may not manage.

In English too, it will surely be exceptionally difficult to teach Year 2 children that, for example, apostrophes are used for singular nouns when possessive and to indicate missing letters in contractions, but not for possessive pronouns.

There has moreover been considerable uncertainty over where the text came from, as several members of the 'Expert Panel' appear to disown it. It seems, in some parts, to derive from a different world than that inhabited by most children in state primary schools. A glaring example is the requirement that Year 3 children be taught how to spell chauffeur and champagne, but the list includes many more words which appear surprising in a spelling list for 7-8 year olds: enclosure, nobly, frantically, dramatically, inflation, reign, professor and piteous.

This suggests two possibilities. Either the Secretary of State has borrowed a curriculum from a school which serves a privileged and successful minority of the population, for example a selective fee-paying preparatory school, and is seeking to impose it thoughtlessly, uncritically and without evaluation on a more diverse majority, or he is deliberately setting up most state primary schools for failure, leading to damning Ofsted judgements and precipitous conversion to academies.

Methods of teaching

When Kenneth Baker introduced the National Curriculum following the Education Reform Act of 1988, he insisted that there was no intention of dictating to teachers how to teach but only what to teach. This promise was soon broken by the incoming Labour Government in the context of a Literacy and Numeracy Hour, followed by various 'strategies' involving particular stereotypes of lesson structure and methodology (e.g. the 'four-part lesson').

Despite Mr Gove's protests to the contrary, the proposed primary curriculum is full of prescription of teaching methodology, both explicit and implicit.

It has been widely understood since Piaget's early research – indeed, possibly since Comenius - that children gradually acquire abilities to operate in more abstract forms of reasoning, and that young children in particular need a dynamic interaction between perception / experience and symbolic representation. There is little awareness of this in the curriculum proposal, which appears to assume an ability to operate at a level of abstraction which is divorced from immediate or imagined experience.

Secondly, and particularly in the field of language and literacy, it is assumed that the best way to increase children's skills and accuracy in use of their native tongue is to provide explicit explanations of grammatical rules. This is highly questionable: the children are likely to be already competent in such syntax in their speech long before they become capable of understanding and integrating the explanation. Secondly, the explanations, particularly in terms of spelling, while sometimes useful, have multiple exceptions.

This raises the question of the exceptional faith being placed on synthetic phonics, to the neglect of other aspects of literacy and its acquisition. This is not to question the need for explicit instruction in phonics, which is almost universally accepted; only in the imaginations of some tabloid journalists is the issue a binary opposition between 'phonics' and 'real books'. My argument is that reading requires various complementary skills and processes, and that the techniques are best acquired when children have a sense that reading is pleasurable and informative.

English is perhaps the least amenable of any European language to a purely phonics approach to literacy: even some of the shortest and most common words are best taught by visual recognition, since the phonic match is approximate and often misleading (the, was, one, two etc.).

Perhaps it is the case that synthetic phonics is more effective than analytic phonics, though the evidence is limited (see Wyse and Styles in *Literacy*, April 2007). The biggest experiment, covering an entire education authority in Scotland, West Dunbartonshire, is frequently misrepresented. Its initiators and managers insist that phonics was only one of its strands, which included working with child minders and nursery staff to create a rich and pleasurable literacy environment for very young children; and a rigorous follow-up by a small army of trained classroom assistants and volunteers of primary and secondary children who were still failing to read.

The West Dunbartonshire project proved highly successful in its own terms by creating dramatic improvements in decoding print, but was less successful in terms of reading for understanding.

It is telling that the evaluation report gives prominence to the following quotation:

For all the money, time, energy and ingenuity we have spent on reading research, we are still at the stage of saying that children learn to read when there is something they want to read and an adult who takes the time and trouble to help them. (Meek 1983)

A high-stakes curriculum

The proposed curriculum is clearly not intended as an aspirational set of recommendations. It is to be implemented in an environment structured by high-stakes accountability (inter-school competition, league table publication of test results, an increasingly draconian inspection regime) as well as possible reforms in teacher pay and grading.

In the days of the 11plus examination, like many of my generation I spent over a quarter of each day in upper primary practicing 'intelligence test' questions. Brian Simon once remarked that children were selected simply on the basis of long division, children would spend half of each day practicing just that.

It is already apparent that many children in Years 5 and 6 endure a curriculum which is narrowed down to the requirements of the KS2 test subjects. It should be clear that once the new test of spelling, punctuation and grammar is introduced, children will spend inordinate lengths of time deciding between colons and semi-colons or distinguishing prepositions from conjunctions, irrespective of their stage of development as writers.

It will also take away significantly from the time they might be spending learning history (British or otherwise), geography, a foreign language, learning to sing or play a musical instrument, painting and appreciating art, exploring the natural world or developing scientific reasoning, learning about Christianity and other religious traditions, and so on.

It is time for ministers to step back from the path which has marked education in England over the past twenty years and which, according to the PISA data, is associated with a substantial decline in educational standards.

Many warnings have been issued about this, not least from Diane Ravitch, an American scholar of impeccable Conservative credentials, once Education Secretary to President Bush Senior. Ravitch, after twenty years advocating blanket testing, privately managed schools (charters) and a high-stakes accountability system, has now publicly recanted, pointing to poor standards, misleading test data, curriculum narrowing and superficial learning and understanding as consequences. In addition, she is appealing to the important role of schools in building community and democratic citizenship. In other words, the measures which were supposed to lead to higher standards have resulted in decline.

Coalition education ministers should pause to learn a lesson, before it is too late.