
The National Curriculum since 1988: panacea or poisoned chalice?

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Two Notions of a National Curriculum: entitlement or straitjacket?

Like many other readers of *FORUM*, when the idea of a National Curriculum was discussed in the 1980s, I was in two minds about what might happen. On the one hand it was difficult to resist the arguments about an entitlement curriculum put forward by some educationists as well as Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) working on the curriculum in those days. It was easy to accept the principle that if young people were deprived of their liberty for 10 or 11 years, then they were entitled to worthwhile knowledge and educational experiences. The Entitlement Curriculum assumed that there were certain areas of knowledge and experience that all young people ought, by right, to have access to irrespective of their background and the school they attended.

On the other hand, the idea of a top-down, centrally imposed, curriculum might well be a straitjacket rather than an entitlement and might impede conscientious teachers from offering what they considered to be a good curriculum, either in terms of the whole school, or their particular teaching responsibilities. After 1979, with the advent of the first Thatcher government, some of us became more concerned about the problems rather than the opportunities of a National Curriculum and became 'watchers' of the central government in that aspect of educational planning. We were not wrong to be vigilant.

When Kenneth Baker took over from Keith Joseph as Education Secretary, it soon became clear that he was much more of a centralist in terms of education when he indicated that he would like to discuss the idea of what he eventually called a National Curriculum.

The 1988 Reform Act and Baker's National Curriculum

What emerged from Baker's discussions with his Department of Education officials and perhaps some of the wrong kind of HMI, was a straitjacket indeed. First of all, what was proposed was a very old-fashioned model of curriculum. Many pointed out the similarity between Baker's list of ten compulsory subjects and the 1902 Secondary Regulations. Baker's ten subjects were: three 'core' subjects – English, mathematics and science – plus seven subjects of lower priority – history, geography, art, music, technology, physical education and computers and information technology. But Baker's proposals for a National Curriculum went much further than a mere list of school subjects. To begin with, each subject was to have detailed programmes of study split up year by year into objectives to be attained and tested. Working Parties for each of the subjects set to work listing what all children should be required to be taught and to learn (and remember). Professor Paul Black was made Chair of the Task Group for Assessment and Testing (TGAT) to work out the best means of prescribing and testing such a curriculum. TGAT made the best of an impossible job and produced an extremely interesting and sophisticated model for educational development and its testing for the 5-16 age group. The 11-year period of compulsory schooling was to be split up into four Key Stages. All children would be tested at the end of each Key Stage, i.e. at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (the end of compulsory schooling).

Paul Black and his colleagues were very careful to point out that the norms for each of those four stages should not be regarded as pass/fail hurdles. The TGAT model was more flexible than that, encouraging teachers to think in terms of pupils with individual profiles of achievement, rather than in crude categories of generalised success or failure. Unfortunately, the pass/fail concept was what dominated the minds of politicians and the media when tests began to appear in the early nineties.

Some observers pointed out that if the ten-subject compulsory curriculum remained, with each subject being tested at regular intervals, then the English National Curriculum would have become the most centrally controlled curriculum ever envisaged by any country. Fortunately, this did not come about, not least because the teacher unions rebelled against the load of testing and record-keeping which inevitably followed from a subject-based testing system which rapidly became a set of targets rather than a useful guide to individual pupils' entitlements and achievements. Part of the objection to this straitjacket was the league tables, which rapidly became part of the system by which schools could be compared with each other in terms of how many pupils 'passed' at the end of each of the four Key Stages. The declaration of opposition to the straitjacket by the combined teacher unions was enough to cause the Government to think again about the details of the National Curriculum and the frequency and the burden of testing. As a result, three kinds of change took place: first, the ten-subject curriculum was prioritised so that effectively only the core subjects of English, mathematics and science were to be tested as originally

planned; second, each of the ten subjects was pruned in terms of content to remove much of the detail; third, gradually some of the non-core subjects were regarded as 'optional', either officially or unofficially, rather than real requirements in a National Curriculum.

By this time Kenneth Baker had moved on to become Chairperson of the Conservative Party and could not be held responsible for the chaos which was developing. Another interesting aspect of the National Curriculum of the early 1990s was that despite the detail involved in the ten-subject National Curriculum, there remained certain important gaps in what was clearly needed for children approaching the twenty-first century. For example, environmental studies could be dealt with only through cross-curricular themes or projects. Similarly, other critics complained that insufficient attention was paid to vocational guidance and careers education in the secondary school. Many others lamented the fact that children's political education and understanding was neglected at a time when they were having to cope with the complexities of a rapidly changing society. Various schemes were introduced to encourage cross-curricular work in the above areas, as well as sex education, health education, moral and social education. The overcrowded curriculum became impossible for schools to organise, especially if they were to include not only the ten compulsory subjects (which were statutory requirements) and cross-curricular work of various kinds which were optional.

New Labour and the National Curriculum

The policy changed from time to time and from Secretary of State to Secretary of State but the muddle continued throughout the Thatcher and Major governments. In general, attempts at reform concentrated on simplifying the curriculum and making the testing regime less onerous. This did not work. The general outcome was to give priority to testing the core subjects of the curriculum and to regard the rest of the National Curriculum as optional.

In 1997, with the promised reforms of the first Blair government, optimists felt that some improvements might come about. In particular, it was hoped that the league table system might be abolished (why have 'choice' if the real intention is to provide good schools in every area?) But this optimism was not to be fulfilled. Blair appeared to be just as keen on choice and competition as his Thatcherite predecessors. The opportunity for rethinking the National Curriculum was missed and by and large the Conservative National Curriculum was continued. Teachers still complained that they were required to do far too much testing and this limited their ability to indulge in creative teaching. They were not listened to. Despite Blair's slogan of 'Education, Education, Education', his government showed no real understanding of the purpose of education in a democratic society. Under Blair the National Curriculum continued to be a muddle but there was one worthwhile innovation which probably became the most successful aspect of Labour educational policy – Education for Citizenship

– which became an additional compulsory subject within the National Curriculum.

This exception to the general rule of disappointment with the National Curriculum under New Labour was the result of an initiative by the Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett. He implemented a programme of 'Education for Citizenship' based largely upon ideas of Bernard Crick, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, London, who had, many years before, taught Blunkett and influenced his thinking about political education in schools. Crick had, for many years, advocated some kind of curriculum for both primary and secondary pupils which would help them to understand the complex political and social world in which they were growing up. Blunkett appointed Crick as Chair of a Planning Committee to draw up proposals for Education for Democracy. The result was a carefully planned proposal for a new, compulsory subject 'Education for Citizenship', which would, if implemented sensibly, in a non-straitjacket way, induct the young into knowledge and understanding of their political and civic system. The intention was to outline not only a new academic subject but also to encourage active participation in the social life of their school and their community.

Fortunately, Blunkett remained as Education Secretary long enough to have his subject accepted in 1990 and seriously implemented by the end of the century. It was a very ambitious programme; it remains to be seen whether it will be successfully implemented in the majority of schools. It would be reasonable to remain optimistic at this stage. Schools interpreting the Crick ideas sensibly, slowly but surely, have claimed that not only do young people benefit from this kind of 'entitlement' but also that the whole ethos of the school can be altered to be more positively social and less authoritarian.

The Present Status of the National Curriculum

Apart from the success of the Citizenship curriculum, the rest of the school curriculum is now in a mess. The idea of pupil entitlement to worthwhile areas of knowledge and experience seems to have all but disappeared. What remains is a testing regime for the subjects that the Government regards as high priority – English, mathematics, science and information technology. But little attention is now being paid to planning the curriculum as a whole unless the school itself takes on that responsibility. The idea of a National Curriculum appears to be all but dead. What remains is a straitjacket in the form of a testing regime plus league tables which Wales and Scotland have abandoned and the teachers in England are still protesting against. But successive New Labour teams have stuck with the policy of 'choice' and have justified league tables in terms of providing information for parents to make wise choices, despite evidence to the contrary. New Labour continued with ad hoc adjustments to the compulsory curriculum largely in terms of making more and more subjects optional rather than areas of 'entitlement'. Critics have complained that both in primary and secondary schools the curriculum has lost all sense of balance: all that remains

are the test results at ages 7, 11 and 14 in the core subjects and the number of pupils gaining five 'good' General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes (A–C) at age 16. So much for breadth and balance!

The opportunity for a worthwhile democratic curriculum plan was missed.

The Future

It seems unlikely that in the near future any action will be taken to reverse the Blair policy of replacing as many comprehensive schools as possible by alternatives such as Academies, specialist schools, faith schools, etc. In the immediate future it will be necessary to urge all schools to revert to the idea of an entitlement curriculum. Even if schools are very different, at least the curriculum should offer basic opportunities to all pupils. How this can be organised when schools are encouraged to diversify rather than have regard for national planning is certainly a difficulty for the immediate future. In the long run, however, it is quite clear that there is no alternative but to have a well-thought-out curriculum for all our young people. But this must be a recipe for entitlement, not a straitjacket. One step towards this will be the abolition of league tables of test results, and perhaps even the tests themselves.

The idea of entitlement needs to be revived and strengthened in terms of a common culture in a plural society. Under Thatcher and Blair that idea was pushed out by notions of market choice and individualistic opportunities (often referred to as meritocracy despite that term being demolished by Michael Young long ago). For a Labour government there has to be a vision of society and education based on democratic values rather than selfish competition.

