
The UK National Curriculum: an historical perspective

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Shortly after the publication of the National Curriculum Consultation Document in July 1987, Denis Lawton and I decided to edit a short Bedford Way Paper looking at the Government's new curriculum proposals from a number of different perspectives. Nine colleagues here at the Institute of Education agreed to take part in the project, the majority of them teachers in the Curriculum Studies Department. The book was published in May 1988.

We had many reasons for *opposing* the Government's curriculum framework. It appeared to us to be simplistic and ill-considered, rejecting all the arguments about a *genuine* common curriculum in favour of a crude subject-based curriculum harking back to the grammar-school model of a much earlier period. It was inappropriate for primary schools and inappropriate for the 14 to 19 age range. It was a 'bureaucratic' curriculum concerned primarily with efficiency and the need to obtain precise information through testing to demonstrate it.

John White's chapter included a much-quoted passage in which John pointed out that the final version of the curriculum must have been produced very hurriedly because, at some point in the late spring of 1987, a week or so before the June General Election was called, an acquaintance from another institution had rung to invite him to an urgent meeting with one of Kenneth Baker's aides:

'The Secretary of State wants to know how to go about introducing a national curriculum. Can you come to a meeting with us next Tuesday morning?' This chance to change the face of English history I declined with the utmost reluctance, making some reference – unless my memory is playing tricks – to having to take my daughter's pet weasel to be spayed that very morning. (p. 117)

Another much-quoted passage came in Richard Aldrich's chapter where he pointed out that the new National Curriculum was at least 83 years old. State secondary schools were established by an Act of 1902, and in 1904 the Board of Education issued regulations which laid down the syllabus for pupils up to the age of 16 or 17. Richard pointed out (p. 22) that there is a striking similarity between the 1904 regulations and the 1987 framework.

1904		1987
English	1	English
Mathematics	2	Mathematics
Science	3	Science
History	4	History
Geography	5	Geography
Foreign Language	6	Modern foreign language
Drawing	7	Art
Physical Exercise	8	Physical Education
Manual work/Housewifery	9	Technology
	10	Music
		Religious Education was later added to become the one and only basic subject

Figure 1. A comparison between the 1987 National Curriculum and the 1904 Board of Education Secondary Regulations.

We were told by officials at the Department of Education and Science (DES) that Baker was badly shaken by the book, and in his speech to the North of England Conference on the Isle of Man, delivered on the 6 January 1989, he singled out contributors to our book for special criticism:

I first outlined my initial plans for a national curriculum to the North of England Education Conference meeting at Rotherham two years ago. The weather and the reception on that occasion were fairly frosty; and during the subsequent public debate before and after the General Election, some remarkably censorious things were said – seldom by me ... One member of the teaching staff of the London Institute of Education, for example, said that the National Curriculum Framework had so little to commend it that 'it has brought into disrepute the very concept of a common curriculum for the nation's schools' (Clyde Chitty, p. 47). One actually described the National Curriculum as a 'folly of unprecedented proportions' (Helen Simons, p. 89). And another said that it was hard to see all this resting intact 'under the critical barrage which it has already

undergone and may be expected to suffer in the next few months’
(John White, p. 117).

Back in the late 1980s, we were all rather puzzled by the National Curriculum because it didn’t seem to fit with the rest of the 1988 Education Act, which was all about encouraging schools to go their own way and compete with one another. In my own chapter, I sought to argue that, from the point of view of the Far Right, the testing programme was far more important than the Curriculum itself:

If the Curriculum has any validity for the New Right, it is surely as justification for a massive programme of national testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16, which will, in turn, result in differentiation, selection and streaming at both the primary and secondary levels. Indeed, the whole process of curriculum standardisation and testing would be ideologically consistent with the rest of the education ‘package’ if it could be seen as providing evidence to parents for the desirability or otherwise of individual schools. (p. 46)

Yet it seems clear that Kenneth Baker failed to convince his Far Right colleagues of the need for a national curriculum; and it may be sensible to view the Curriculum as something that divided both Right and Left.

LEFT			RIGHT
		A national curriculum will promote social unity and make teachers more accountable.	If market processes are given free rein there should be no attempt to impose a national curriculum on all schools.
All pupils should have the right to negotiate their own curriculum.	It is essential for all pupils to have access to broadly the same curriculum experiences to at least the age of sixteen. The HMI VIEW	DES VIEW/ HILLGATE GROUP	View of the majority of NEW RIGHT THINK-TANKS (CPS/IEA)

Figure 2. Political views of the National Curriculum.

I had a commitment to the HMI model and to the idea of ‘areas of experience’ put forward in HMI documents published between 1977 and 1983.

- THE AESTHETIC AND CREATIVE
- THE ETHICAL
- THE LINGUISTIC
- THE MATHEMATICAL
- THE PHYSICAL
- THE SCIENTIFIC
- THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL
- THE SPIRITUAL

Figure 3. HMI Areas of Experience. Taken from *Curriculum 11-16* (Red Book One), December 1977.

Another group of Conservatives who were bitterly opposed to the National Curriculum were the so-called 'Conservative Modernisers' whose main achievement in the area of curriculum initiatives had been the introduction of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) in the autumn of 1983. This group had wielded enormous influence while David Young was chairperson of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) from 1982 to 1984. And they were dismayed to find that the TVEI warranted only two brief mentions in the 1987 Consultation Document.

Yet it can be argued that the modernisers scored a sort of belated 'victory' with the abandonment of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4 after 1990. Starting with the Dearing review, we have seen the re-introduction of the idea of the 14 to 19 'Continuum', with youngsters being advised to follow either 'academic' or 'vocational' courses – or a combination of the two – from the age of 14.

So Where are We Now?

Back in 1988, I argued that, with all its apparent defects, the National Curriculum in its original form would probably last for only about 25 years; and it now seems I was being unduly optimistic! When New Labour came to power in 1997, it decided to give priority in the primary school curriculum to literacy and numeracy, with the aesthetic and creative areas of the curriculum being downgraded and marginalised. And we know from the early reports of the Alexander Primary Review that many children across the whole spectrum of 'ability' are 'in flight' from an experience of learning that they find 'unsatisfactory, un motivating and uncomfortable'. There has, in fact, been a marked deterioration in the overall quality of primary education because of the narrowing of the curriculum and the intensity of test preparation. At Key Stage Four, the 1987 Curriculum has been systematically abandoned over the past 20 years, with seven of the original subjects now being optional for 14 year-olds, and we are soon about to have a revised curriculum at Key Stage Three.

I still support the idea of a broad common curriculum for children aged 5 to 14 (not 16), but I hate the way the National Curriculum quickly became a National Syllabus. If it came to a choice between not having a national curriculum and having the arrangements imposed on us in 1988, I think I'd rather we didn't have one at all.

