

EDITORIAL

Characteristically Flawed: the Government's new primary curriculum proposals

CLYDE CHITTY & COLIN RICHARDS

Conservative education ministers have always been remarkably schizophrenic in their attitude towards the idea of a national curriculum, to be applied to all pupils. They might wish to argue that an agreed curriculum for all those attending state schools is a good idea, but, at the same time, they are happy to promote new types of school on the grounds they do *not* have to show strict adherence to the National Curriculum's proposals in all their precise details.

These mixed feelings about the desirability or otherwise of all schools having to follow a prescriptive, state-imposed curriculum, with specific instructions about learning, have not, of course, prevented these same politicians from meddling with the framework and content of the curriculum, at both the primary and secondary levels.

Media reports of the Government's most recent blueprint for the primary-school curriculum, published in the middle of June 2012, tended to focus on three or four main features: children being encouraged to recite poetry from memory by the age of five; the use of officially-mandated spelling lists; making a foreign language compulsory from the age of seven; and expecting children to be able to recite the twelve-times table from the age of nine. This might indeed be construed as a 'back-to-basics' curriculum, with its emphasis on academic rigour and 'traditional' approaches to learning.

Not surprisingly, the new reforms were condemned as 'fatally flawed' by a number of leading academics, described by Michael Gove in a debate in the House of Commons (18 June 2012) as those education professors who wish to curry favour with Ed Miliband's Labour Party.

Once again, a Conservative government chose to ignore the advice of the team of 'experts' invited to advise on the drawing up of the curriculum changes, which might suggest that it was rather naïve and unwise to accept the invitation in the first place. It is pretty clear that education ministers will always give vent to their own prejudices, rather than listen to evidence-based advice.

One of those advisers, Professor Andrew Pollard, told *The Guardian* that the new curriculum framework was 'overly prescriptive' in two ways. In the first place, it was extremely detailed, and, secondly, there was the emphasis on 'linearity' – the idea that children learn first this, then that. According to Professor Pollard, 'in reality, people learn in a variety of different ways, and for that you need flexibility – for teachers to pick up on that and vary things in the classroom accordingly' (reported in *The Guardian*, 13 June 2012).

The charge of inflexibility was disputed by the Chair of the expert panel, Tim Oates, who, in a statement issued by the Department for Education, said: 'Publishing content, year by year, is not some rigid straitjacket. There remains flexibility for all schools in the scheduling of content'.

But in a short piece in *The Guardian* (16 June 2012) children's author Michael Rosen questioned the very idea of an expert panel being chaired by someone who 'has never taught in a primary school and has never taught English'. For Rosen, it was regrettable that the proposals' focus should be on 'the acquisition of reading as a hoarding of letters, sounds and words', rather than on 'children's developing awareness of what is enjoyable or intriguing about poems, stories and play'. Talking about poetry as 'stuff you must learn and recite' is simply a way of 'controlling and taming it'.

This seems to be a major critique of the Government's blueprint: here we have a set of *instructions* to teachers, who must, in turn, *instruct* children. Learning can at times be difficult and challenging, but it can also be fun and exciting.

Clyde Chitty

A Re-Revised Code for the Twenty-first Century? A Personal Response to the Publication of the Government's Proposals for the Primary Curriculum

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 here 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 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. The government's purported 'freedom' for schools to vary the placement of content within each key stage will not mean much in practice, especially in schools deemed 'in need of improvement' or 'inadequate' or even in many so-called 'good' or 'outstanding' schools.

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 'farcical' 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 highly 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, but perhaps not even then given the ubiquity of a national testing regime.

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 consideration 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 in 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.

Colin Richards

